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7

**THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE**





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OUR SPONGER GROWS EVER MORE POPULAR.

This popular series is entering its long-awaited seventh volume. Continuing where the sixth volume left off, **Zenjirou** is more popular with the ladies than ever before. This time, he's stuck working with **Freya** to avoid a major international incident, growing closer to her in the process.

Will the two of them be able to overcome the hurdles placed before them? And just how close will they become?

It's a string of events that'll have **Queen Aura's** fans fretting! Are Zenjirou's feelings for the teenage princess awakening? Read on to discover her charms!

INTRODUCTION

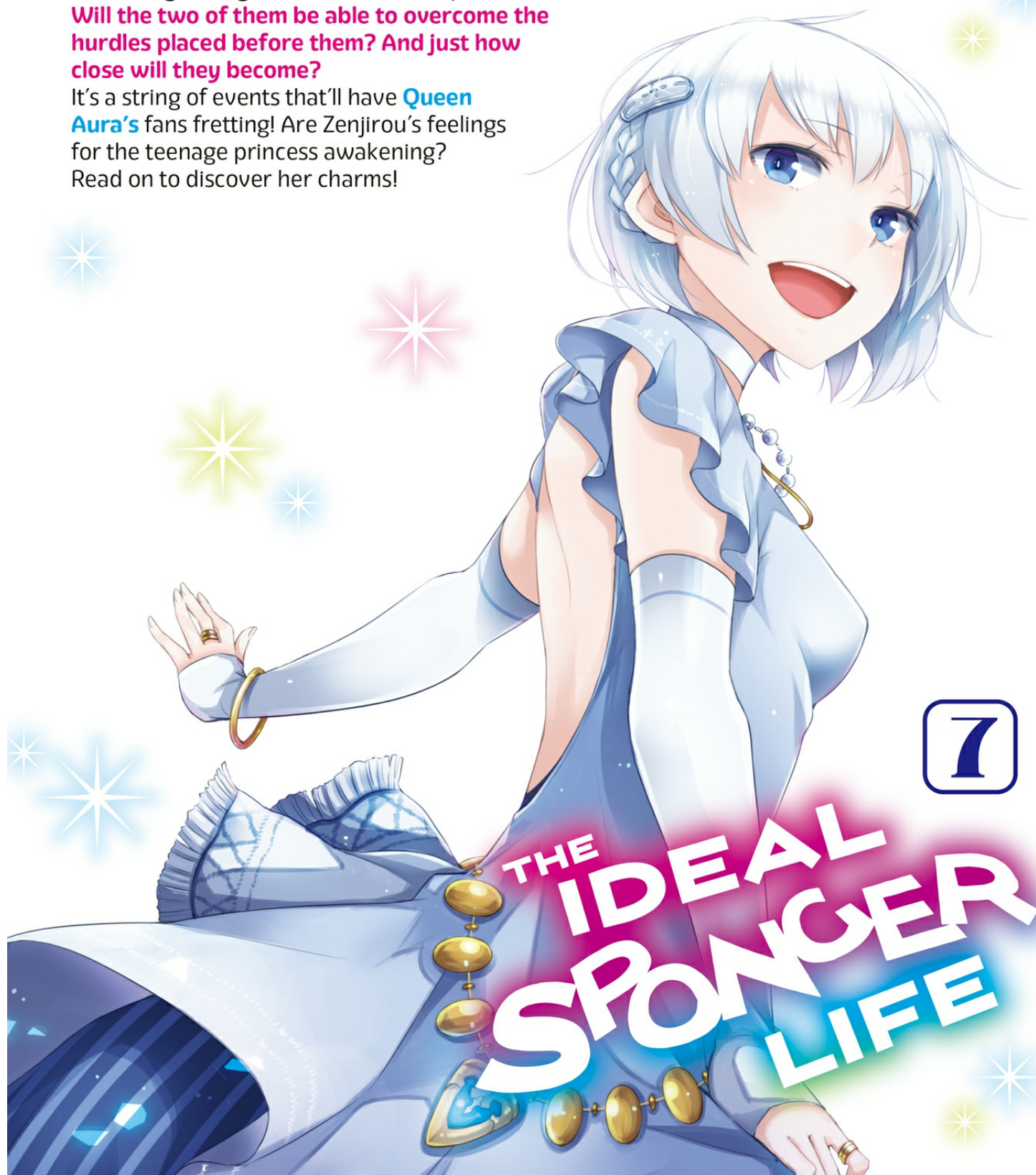


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Prologue — The Journey Out

The meat drakes that were the main source of meat on the Southern Continent were quadrupedal herbivores. They laid frequent clutches, grew fast, and the vast majority of their bodies were edible, so they acquired their unenviable appellation.

Most of what ended up on dining tables in the country was from specimens raised as cattle, but there were of course large numbers of wild drakes. The main difference between the two types was plain to see. Wild meat drakes had two pointed horns sprouting from their heads, while the domesticated ones had them removed.

Removing their horns didn't just make them physically weaker, it also caused decreased aggression and made them easier to rear. Therefore, those born to the farmers would have their horns removed almost as soon as they'd grown enough to hatch. Conversely, this also meant that wild meat drakes were surprisingly dangerous. The odd hunter or soldier could easily meet their match at a horned charge from a wild specimen.

Civilians with little combat potential of their own therefore avoided the creatures as much as possible. However, this was entirely the opposite for groups on long journeys with sufficient strength, who saw the creatures as walking meals.

Capua produced large quantities of sugar and spices, so they were in a much better position with preserved foods than the Northern Continent, but long journeys entirely subsisting on rations were still hard on them. Forced onto a diet of dried meat covered with salt and pepper, along with hard flatbreads, those dangerous creatures became nothing more than "fresh meat."

Zenjirou's group, as they traveled to the Gaziel march, was no different. Thus, the wild meat drake that carelessly poked its head from the trees along the salt road was set upon by the frenzied soldiers.

The wild trumpet of the beast echoed through the trees.

“There!”

“You’re not getting away!”

“It went that way! Get it!”

Several soldiers coordinated their pursuit of the drake as it ran through the dense trees along the road. A specialized hunter would have snared it in a trap or used an arrow to kill it from a distance, but soldiers were stuck with the more primitive method of surrounding it and overcoming it with numbers.

“Whoa!”

“It’s a big one!”

“It’s *not* getting away!”

The spearmen drove the drake out onto the road. Waiting there was a girl with silver hair along with a blonde warrior. The silver-haired girl—Princess Freya—waited with both tension and excitement visible on her face as she held a spear almost twice as long as she was tall.

“It’s coming, Princess. Perhaps we *should* switch?” suggested the blonde—Skaji—from beside her, short spear and shield ready to protect her mistress.

Freya, however, shook her head at her confidante’s kind suggestion, making her short silver hair sway.

“No, let me do this, Skaji. I have precious few opportunities to take out a drake.”

As she spoke, it became obvious that the look in her eyes was more of aggressive excitement than nervousness.

“Very well. From what I have heard, they are similar in temperament to wild boar. Ensure you do not stand directly in its path and strike from the side, please.”

“I understand.”

With her bodyguard’s permission granted, the Northern princess’s face broke into a smile that was visibly joyous through the tension on her face as she glared into the trees.

Several seconds later, the drake appeared.

“Groooaar!” it bellowed.

The beast brandished its horns proudly, charging through the branches with a bodily tackle as it leaped out into the open space of the road.

“It’s here, Princess!”

“Right!”

Seeing a wild drake for the first time, Freya couldn’t keep the nerves from showing on her face.

The animal’s round eyes were wide and bloodshot as it continued on in a straight line. It looked almost like a triceratops, a dinosaur that had once roamed Earth. Unlike the triceratops, however, it had no horn on its nose.

The biggest difference between boar and meat drakes was, well, their sizes. Assuming the beast in front of her was of average size, meat drakes were two to three times bigger than boar.

It bellowed once more, and Freya’s lips quirked into a smile at its ferocity. She’d only been able to hunt rabbits, foxes, maybe a deer, at most, back home. Herbivore or not, she could now stand against this drake. She gave in to the shivers of joy running down her spine and readied her spear, keeping her gaze fixed on the beast bearing down on her. It trumpeted as it charged.

“Now!”

Freya sidestepped the charging drake’s path and threw her entire weight behind the spear.

“Hyah!”

A cry of dismay made its way from the creature’s throat as the spear found its home in the drake’s left shoulder. However, considering how light Freya was, her attack—while capable of damaging it—was unable to bring it to a halt.

“Huh?”

On top of that, she’d either not stepped far enough or overstepped with her subsequent attack and was now in its path again. The warrior at her side

reacted to the danger before the princess herself.

“Princess! Down!”

While it sounded like she was treating her liege like she might a dog, the events were so sudden that it was unavoidable.

“Right!” Freya yelled, throwing herself to the ground as ordered.

“Hah!” Skaji grunted, her foot blurring across the empty space that had a mere second earlier been occupied by the princess.



While she may have been a giant compared to other women, Skaji was less than a quarter of the drake's height. Stopping its charge directly was, of course, impossible. However, the way she shifted her weight at the moment of impact meant that she could at least shift the drake's trajectory to the side.

It grunted as the kick hit home. It was a perfect economy of motion as the partial roundhouse smacked into the side of its face. As Skaji had planned, it shifted the beast's charge past the downed form of her liege.

The combination of Freya's spear and Skaji's kick made the drake lose its balance, and it fell to the ground. Even as it lay there, the fact that its eyes were still rolling in their sockets was proof that it had not yet died, but it had at least lost consciousness for the moment.

"Wonderful, Your Highness. Now, finish it while it is stunned," the tall warrior said, extending a hand to Freya.

"Thank you, Skaji. Does this not count as your own kill, though, rather than my own?" she asked with a pout, accepting the hand before using her sleeve to rub the dirt from her cheek.

Indeed, it certainly did seem like Skaji's kick had brought the drake low. Yet, it was not Skaji who answered the princess but one of the soldiers who had driven it from the trees.

"No, Your Highness. Your spear struck its vitals perfectly. Even if we leave it as it is, it would soon bleed out. Lady Victoria's move was nothing more than something to protect you."

In answer, Freya crouched down next to the animal and looked at the wound she'd inflicted.

"You certainly seem to be right," she said after finishing her inspection.

The spear had penetrated deeply. The soldier had been speaking honestly rather than merely offering honeyed words.

"Very well. In that case..." Having accepted their opinions, she took a hatchet from her waistband. "Where is the best place to cut for the finisher? Embarrassingly enough, this is the first time I've taken steel to a drake."

“Here, Your Highness, in the gap between the neck and collar. Are you sure you do not wish to use a spear?” a soldier asked worriedly. His concern was not unfounded, as a strong drake with the vitality they were known for was by no means easy to kill.

Freya smiled, though. “Thank you for your concern, but I shall be fine. This is my specialty.”

Confidently, Freya raised her axe in a firm grip. She wasn’t exaggerating. While she was slight for a Northern woman and her fighting skills were only that of an average warrior, even after intense training, her axe skills were nothing short of masterful.

Due to that, she had never failed to finish off her prey with it, be they quadruped or biped. There would be no blemish on that record, even on the Southern Continent.

“That is the spot. Very well then, hyah!”

The sharp swing cut right through the spot the soldier had indicated, severing the drake’s vitals in a single blow.

Meanwhile, while Freya was hunting, Zenjirou was simply waiting quietly in the carriage at the side of the road. There was a distinctly pitiable feeling to shutting himself up in the carriage as a grown man while a younger girl went out hunting, but he would be no help given his lack of self-defense capabilities. Rather than being a boon to them, he would be nothing but a burden. All he could do was wish her well and let himself be protected.

As he sat, somewhat uncomfortably, in the carriage, he eventually heard a cheer from the soldiers outside.

“Natalio?”

“The hunt appears to be over, sir. There would be no issue with joining them now should you wish to do so.”

Zenjirou nodded at the knight sitting across from him.

“I do. Natalio, Ines, if you would?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Understood.”

Both knight and maid opposite him rose from their seats. The carriage he was riding in was a huge example, drawn by eight dash drakes and only to be used by royalty. It therefore had enough headroom for even a tall man to stand at full height without concern. In fact, it was big enough that people from modern Earth would equate it more with a train carriage than a car.

Natalio stepped out first, just in case, and checked the area.

“There are no issues, Sir Zenjirou,” he reported.

“Good work,” Zenjirou replied, stepping down from the carriage. “Ack, that’s a tad bright,” he added once the sudden change in light registered, making his eyes water. He blinked several times to clear his vision.

While he was getting used to the light, the soldiers who had thus far been guarding the carriage had established a perimeter around him. Such a perimeter for a former commoner like Zenjirou was rather disconcerting, what with there being armed men in every direction. He was royalty now, though, and this level of protection was a matter of course every time he stepped outside.

The man commanding the guards was Natalio, the only knight thus far who had sworn fealty to Zenjirou personally.

Zenjirou didn’t need to say anything; the guards all remained evenly spaced around him. Whether he slowed slightly to look around or stumbled for a brief moment or quickened his pace due to the embarrassment of stumbling, the formation around him barely wavered. Even if he broke into a full sprint, he likely wouldn’t be able to shake the ring of men around him. Surrounded by his loyal guard, he started walking along the salt road.

“It feels like someone widened a track up to some shack in the mountains,” he remarked quietly to himself as he walked along the weed-covered dirt path.

He’d not seen many roads in Japan that weren’t paved. Even his birthplace, far out in the sticks as it was, had its main roads properly paved. Bare dirt paths were mostly relegated to footpaths between rice paddies and tracks up the remote mountains.

He was also wearing the unfamiliar leather shoes from this world, so his steps were taken with a slight lack of surety as Ines passed him. She was moving so gracefully that Zenjirou felt no need to call out to stop her as she glided up to Natalio, who was keeping watch at the head of the formation, and murmured something into his ear. The soldier let out a gasp, straightening and then immediately drawing an arrow from the quiver on his back and nocking it before letting it fly into the canopy along with a yell.

The arrow thunked into something that had been hiding in the branches. The thing screeched piercingly as it fell to the floor at the side of the road. Startled by the screech and thud, Zenjirou stopped. Natalio was protecting him from in front, keeping his wyvern bow in his left hand as he issued orders to the soldiers surrounding them.

“It’s a poach drake. I think I took care of it, but three of you go and check. If it still lives then finish it off. The rest of you protect Sir Zenjirou.”

“Yes, sir!” the troop chorused in response, three of the eight men moving off into the leaves.

There was a grunt and then a keening wail. The beast must have been still alive, and one of the men had used his short spear to rectify that.

“It is neutralized!” the soldier called back with a wave.

That prompted Natalio to move off again. “The threat has been eliminated, sir. Please, continue.”

“Uh...right.”

Zenjirou was overwhelmed by what had just happened in front of him, but he nodded jerkily and started walking again. Eventually, he reached the area where the creature had fallen.

“It’s...not exactly the most attractive of animals,” he commented, frowning at the sight.

“Poach drakes are, in every sense of the word, shunned in the forest,” Natalio agreed with an amused huff.

The creature was indeed rather unsightly. It was about half as tall as a grown

man and covered in dark green scales. It was likely a form of drake, although its body structure was more reminiscent of a monkey's. It had short legs, long arms, and a long, thin tail. Although it had all the typical adaptations for tree living, its face was more like a lizard's.

The fact that it had already died and therefore had its forked tongue jutting out from its mouth just made the sight even less pleasant.

"Shunned in the forest? I assume that isn't simply due to its appearance?" Zenjirou asked.

"Indeed," Natalio answered with a short nod. "They are named for what they do: poach. They lurk in the trees and pounce on the prey that passes underneath them. That lets them be audacious and even steal eggs or young, even from groups of swarm raptors if the latter let their guard down. Humans are no different for them; poach drakes will prioritize children and smaller women. If they are unable to find suitable prey then they'll use their claws to take *part* of their prey back with them."

For humans, the easiest parts to take would be an arm or head. Zenjirou's expression twitched, his fear clear.

"That...is a frightening creature, Natalio. Good work taking it out."

"It was Ines who noticed it, not me, so those words would be better served directed at her."

Zenjirou looked in surprise at his maid, but at the same time he could accept it. After all, she *had* moved from behind him to speak to Natalio, which must have been when she'd alerted him to its presence.

"I simply happened to catch sight of it. It was your skill that allowed us to immediately fire upon the drake in the trees, and that is certainly worthy of praise," Ines replied with a rueful smile and shake of her head as she complimented his skills in turn.

"I see. Right," Zenjirou agreed, looking up at the canopy of leaves.

The trees at the side of the road were taller than telephone poles at the very least, and the taller ones were at least twice that. Firing an arrow that far into the air *and* striking a vital blow was most certainly something that required

extraordinary skill. It had also been quick enough that the poach drake hadn't noticed and thrown his aim off.

While part of it may have been due to the assistance of the wyvern bow, there was no doubt that it had still taken significant skill.

"It's heartening to see," Zenjirou told the man. "Shamefully, my own combat potential is like that of a woman, so I will be relying on you entirely."

"Understood, sir. Even should it cost my life, I will ensure you are protected."

Freya came into sight as the two of them were having their conversation. She noticed them immediately and waved with a broad smile. Zenjirou answered with a wave of his own and a strained laugh.

"Her Highness is an exceedingly active woman," Ines commented, giving him some slightly painful backup.

Zenjirou's strained smile didn't fall as he nodded back. "She's energetic indeed; it's rather charming."

The hand she was waving held an axe covered in drake blood.

Chapter 1 — Arrival

Outside of several encounters with wild drakes, the journey passed mostly without incident, and the group arrived safely at the march's capital.

The capital was a walled city, with tall ramparts surrounding it. Of course, that was nothing special; the Southern Continent had clear enemies in the form of the drakes that lived there, so settlements in border regions were always protected by walls.

The estate of the lord was also more like a fortress than anything else. It was almost like another fortress built into the fortress that the city was to begin with. It served as a fallback point for the citizens, so it was fairly large but far from showing off.

Compared to the palaces Zenjirou had lived in so far, and indeed his month-long sojourn in Valentia, it was almost shabby. However, he'd spent his recent days being shaken to pieces by an unfamiliar mode of transportation and relatively rough living, so being able to enter a proper building was something he was grateful for. Having finally arrived, he could at last shed his traveling gear and breathe a sigh of relief.

"Hahhh, the fresh air feels great on my feet..." He lounged on the sofa with his shoes off and his bare feet resting on a low table in the annex he'd been assigned. It was ill-mannered and something he rarely did even in the inner palace, but he didn't have the strength to put on airs right now. The carriage had practically no suspension, and he wasn't used to camping, so the trip had taken both a physical and mental toll.

"Would you care for some cold water, Sir Zenjirou?" Ines offered with a gentle smile, holding a chalice out.

They were the only two in the room, so Zenjirou could act his normal self with the trusted maid. "Yeah, thanks, Ines. Still, you're a tough one. You spent the whole trip caring for me, so you should be just as tired," he said, looking up at the woman next to him.

He was right. There was no sign of any fatigue in her composed bearing. The middle-aged maid chuckled at her master's wonder.

"I'm used to it. I supported Her Majesty on the battlefield during the war."

"Oh, that's quite something. I'm glad to hear it," he answered.

He was honestly shocked by the admission, but he could also see it being true. That background was probably a large part of why she had been assigned to him on both occasions he'd been sent away.

For most maids who never left the palaces, the camping would have been tough on them.

"You will be staying in this annex, Sir Zenjirou," she said, taking the empty chalice from him. "There will likely be several inconveniences, but I hope you can understand that."

"Yeah, I know. I figured that from the start; it's not a problem," he answered from his still reclined position.

Zenjirou had come here in order to attend the wedding between the eldest daughter of the Gaziel family that ruled the march, Lucinda, and General Pujol. Of course, General Pujol was the guest of honor on this occasion, so the main estate would be used by the Guillén family, led by its current head, Pujol.

Even with his royal status, Zenjirou was inevitably relegated to the annex. For his part, he didn't feel a particular need for a vast amount of space in his day-to-day life, so that was no real issue.

Having no bathing facilities in the building *was* a problem, but there would be water prepared for him each day, so it wasn't insurmountable. He would obviously have refused a permanent move to such a home, but it wasn't something he felt the need to be unreasonable about as a long-term stop on a journey.

"Phew..."

Once he'd spent a while lounging around, Ines spoke to him again from his side.

"Sir Zenjirou, my apologies for disturbing your relaxation, but I believe it

would be appropriate to greet the servants. Your loungewear will be sufficient if you could straighten your clothing.”

“Oh, it’s already time for that? Got it,” he said, putting on socks and slippers.

Ines was the only maid Zenjirou had brought from the inner palace. After all, the marriage between the family’s eldest daughter and the head of the army was a huge event and had prompted the gathering of a vast number of nobles in the march.

The estate was sufficient to house that extreme number, but it was still a large burden both in terms of living area and food consumption. Therefore the guests had been requested to bring as few attendants with them as possible.

Once Zenjirou had corrected his posture and outfit, there was a short wait before a knock came at the door.

Three women entered. Two of them were middle-aged while the third was slight in stature and didn’t seem to have quite reached adulthood yet.

The difference in age was more than enough for parent and child, but it was obvious the girl was the one at the head of this group. The positions they all stood in set her in the center, for one, but her clothing was different as well.

The two older women wore simple clothing along the lines of workwear, while the girl wore a dress that was clearly made of fine materials, albeit plain in design.

She was definitely not an attendant and was most likely a girl of nobility.

Maybe she’s a child of one of their vassal families? Zenjirou thought to himself.

The girl’s nerves were clear as she spoke with a tense expression.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Zenjirou. I am the second daughter of the Gaziel family, Nilda. Father has ordered that I am to be your caretaker during your stay with us. Please ask me for anything you require.”

Her speech must have been preprepared, as despite her nerves she managed to get through it all in one go. The girl, Nilda, then bowed, making her short ponytail bounce.

“I see. While I may cause you some trouble, I offer my thanks. Incidentally, if you are the family’s second daughter, would that mean you are the younger sister of both Lady Lucinda and Lord Xavier?”

Despite his confusion at her introduction, he kept his composure as he asked his question.

Unable to divine his motives, the girl’s already large eyes widened further as she answered. “I am indeed. Lucinda and Xavier are my siblings from another mother.”

Her answer was loud but also proud and happy, showing an unvarnished affection for the two of them. Half-siblings in noble society could often have rather conflicted relationships, but it appeared that such concerns did not apply here.

“Lord Xavier was a great help to me while I was in Valentia. If the opportunity arises, I would like to speak to him and thank him in person.”

“Thank you; I will tell him that,” Nilda said, her smile deepening.

“In which case, I apologize for the abruptness, but would you prepare the water? I would like to wash off the grime from traveling before the meal.”

“I will ensure it is ready at once!” the girl exclaimed, straightening and giving a bow. Then, followed by the two older women, she left the room.

“Ines...” Zenjirou said after a period of silence, his expression hard.

“What is it, Sir Zenjirou?”

“Her Majesty gave me a simple briefing on the people of importance here before I left. However, nowhere within that briefing was the name Nilda Gaziel mentioned. Am I to assume that this omission was purposeful?”

Despite the fact that only Ines was in the room, Zenjirou maintained the speech and mannerisms of a royal—this conversation was that important.

His loyal maid’s expression remained serious as she answered instantly. “No, I would say that such a possibility is unthinkable. Illegitimate or not, Her Majesty gains nothing from hiding the existence of a daughter of the Gaziel family from you, Sir Zenjirou.”

He relaxed slightly at that. He loved his wife, but before she was his wife, she carried the country on her shoulders. Therefore there was always a possibility that she would hide things from Zenjirou or else ignore his wishes and involve him in her political schemes. He understood that, but it didn't make it feel any better. If that wasn't the case, then he could rest much more easily.

"Which would mean this discrepancy is not intentional on Her Majesty's part. The simplest explanation would be that she simply forgot to mention it, but..."

"Her Majesty *is* only human, so I would hesitate to call it impossible, but I believe that possibility can be discounted for now. Her Majesty is also supported by Secretary Fabio."

"Which leaves the possibility that Her Majesty is unaware of the existence of Nilda Gaziel. Is that possible? I would think a family important enough to have command of a march would have their lineage well known by Her Majesty," he said doubtfully.

"It is relatively common for illegitimate children to be less commonly known," Ines told him calmly. "Conversely, there have also been cases where a feudal lord has hidden the birth of such a child from the royal family for whatever reason. However, in both of those circumstances, it would be unthinkable for her to be placed directly before you. It would usually lead to suspicion, and Lady Nilda's expression had no hint of such thoughts, even though her nerves were clearly visible. The Gaziel family is also not particularly adept at such roundabout methods, so I believe we can assume that it is unlikely."

"So essentially, we don't know?"

"Indeed."

The situation was baffling, but the other party didn't seem to be malicious, simply inscrutable. He remained sitting on the sofa, chin in hand for a while as he thought, but couldn't draw any conclusions.

"We will report back to the capital and ask for judgment. Until then, we shall take a safe tack."

"Understood. I shall make those arrangements." Ines nodded respectfully as Zenjirou made his usual call to leave the decisions to Aura.



That evening, once Zenjirou had washed up and taken a nap, he was woken by Ines, who he asked about their dinner plans.

“Um, so dinner tonight will be an outdoor meal provided by Princess Freya in the garden?”

“Indeed. More accurately, that is the current suggestion from the princess, and she is asking for your permission. A large amount of the smoked meat from the meat drake she hunted still remains, and she suggested offering that to everyone. Of course, if you do not grant your permission, the smoked meat will be given as a gift to the Gaziel march.”

“Oh, the leftover meat,” Zenjirou murmured.

The memories of the hunt were still fresh in his mind. The majority of the meat had been eaten that night, but the leftovers had been smoked and stored with their supplies. The smoked meat here would be used to put on a large feast.

“I don’t personally see any issue with that, but would my giving permission or not cause problems either way?”

The woman answered her liege’s question smoothly. “It will. Under the assumption that it goes ahead, you would also need to invite the other nobles in the annex, beginning with Lady Nilda. Such an event, held with your permission, would give a stronger impression that Princess Freya will become your concubine and vice versa if you were to refuse permission. It would be taken as dissatisfaction with her.”

“I see...”

He couldn’t hide his grimace at the polite explanation. In other words, accepting the suggestion here would be taken as an endorsement of her position as his concubine. He *didn’t* endorse that kind of thing, so it was akin to choking himself.

But what if he were to refuse? It wasn’t that simple, though, as doing so would be a public statement that he didn’t appreciate her presence. As far as Freya’s position as a concubine, her partnership during this wedding as his

partner was officially sanctioned by Aura. A public refutation of that would be taken as a disagreement between the queen and prince consort.

“Fine. Tell Princess Freya to proceed.”

It was the only choice he had, despite knowing he was undermining himself. When the question was asked whether he should be prioritizing his own wants and his wife’s position, the answer was obvious.

The maid nodded slightly at his answer. “Very well; I shall go and inform her.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he answered shortly, getting up and changing his clothes.

Zenjirou’s obstinance about showing himself to the maids in pajamas and underwear had finally faded, and he stripped out of his blue-striped pajamas, taking Ines’s help to change into the native attire. It was the same kind of clothing as the third uniform he wore in the royal palace, but it was less adorned and easier to move around in. He’d gotten used to the clothing recently and could put it on alone, but according to the maids it was “unthinkable” that they would allow him to dress himself for any public appearances.

While he changed, the light conversation continued.

“Have you grown closer to Princess Freya, Sir Zenjirou?”

“Well, I think the journey’s done that. After all, we were stuck in the same carriage for days. I’m fairly fond of her personality anyway.”

He wasn’t lying. While her speech and conduct were refined, she wasn’t particularly indirect like most nobles were, but rather active and expressive, and Zenjirou didn’t dislike her at all.

“Then does that mean that there are no further issues with taking her as your concubine?”

However, his answer to her second question was a clear negation. “Those are completely different things. The issue isn’t my feelings towards her as an individual, but uneasiness about any friction that bringing a second wife into a happy family might cause.”

A combination of a happily married couple and a woman who had a good

relationship with both halves of that couple seemed possible. But Zenjirou couldn't see two women being close to the same man ending well no matter how good a friendship they had. He knew that there was a difference in culture and values here, but his emotions hadn't caught up with that.

"The inner palace is really easy to live in right now. Aura's there, I'm there, and Zenkichi's there. I know Freya's a good person, but I'm honestly scared of how bringing her into the household might go."

Ines's eyes narrowed slightly. "You most certainly love both Her Majesty and Prince Carlo Zen."

"Ah, well, um, yeah. That's how it is. Oh, that reminds me, you always call Zenkichi Carlo Zen..."

He shied away from the blunt praise and changed the topic, albeit blatantly. Ines abbreviated Carlos Zenkichi to Carlo Zen. Zenjirou was the only person to call him Zenkichi, while most people called him Carlos. Some, however, called him Carlo Zen, and Ines was one of that minority.

As far as Zenjirou was concerned, it was a meaningless shift in topic, done for the sole purpose of moving away from the current matter, but it held some meaning for Ines.

"I do. The name Prince Carlos will always bring King Carlos II to mind for me." She had a distant look in her eyes, almost nostalgic.

"King Carlos II...that was the king before Aura, right? Yeah, they do have the same name. Shouldn't it be the name 'King Carlos' that reminds you of him, then?"

Zenjirou was using the knowledge Octavia had provided him, and Ines answered without her expression changing.

"You are correct, but he was only on the throne for less than a year. When I served him, he was always Prince Carlos."

"Wait! You served him?!"

His eyes widened in shock, but it made sense with some thought. Ines was around ten years older than Aura, so it was hardly unusual that she would have

served another lord first.

“I did, so he is all that comes to mind when I use the name Prince Carlos, and I therefore use the name Prince Carlo Zen for your son. If it displeases you, I can change that. Would you prefer I do?”

Zenjirou shook his head with a smile. “No, there’s no need. I was just curious.”

It was clear that she had both love and affection for the young prince, whatever she called him. There was no need for him to quibble over inconsequential matters like his nickname.

“Thank you, Sir Zenjirou. There, you are ready.”

She had finished dressing him and offered him a warm smile with a bow.



A garden meal was by no means a rarity in noble society, and therefore even this annex had sufficient provisions to hold one.

Said provisions consisted of a well for washing the foodstuffs, a counter for cutting ingredients, and a stone construction to hold the fire for cooking, but it was sufficient for simple meals.

Zenjirou watched from a small distance away as Freya’s smile was lit up by the firelight, the sweet scent of cooking meat and vegetables filling the air.

“It looks to be finished. I will serve it, so wait a moment.”

She seemed truly happy to take command of the cooking, her smile unfaltering as the red light from the fire sparkled in her silver hair while she whirled between the different tasks. While she was full-fledged royalty, the smile on her face didn’t appear false in any way.

Maybe cooking’s a hobby of hers? Zenjirou thought. As he considered that, a large figure made its way over to him.

“Your Majesty, if it takes your fancy?”

He looked up to see a tall woman—Victoria Kronkvist, or Skaji—offering him a silver plate of meat and vegetable skewers.

“Oh, Lady Victoria. Thank you,” he answered, taking a skewer from Freya’s confidante and lifting it slightly in thanks.

“Not at all. In fact, I should be thanking you. Truly, you have my deepest thanks in her place for allowing her highness to attend this event.”

Zenjirou cocked his head slightly at the earnest bow of her head the woman had given him. While allowing her attendance also meant recognizing Freya more as a concubine, that didn’t seem to be what she was thanking him for.

“I am unfamiliar with the customs of the Northern Continent,” he said eventually. “Is there perhaps some special meaning to this outdoor meal?”

Was it some sort of plot? he wondered, and his voice was slightly harsher than usual. The warrior didn’t falter, though, and shook her head.

“There is not, nor is there anything that would cause you concern. It is not *meaningless*, however. Being able to provide a meal like this with meat she hunted herself has long since been a dream of the princess. In our country, only warriors are permitted to host meals like this.”

Zenjirou understood more or less what she was saying. He bit off a chunk of skewered meat, chewed, and swallowed it, then spoke again.

“Which would imply that Princess Freya is not a warrior? Our own soldiers praised her spearwork.”

While in Capua, women generally didn’t become warriors to begin with, that wasn’t the case in Freya’s homeland. After all, Skaji called herself a warrior.

Inferring the thrust of his question, she shook her head with a slight smile. “Her highness certainly possesses the minimum of strength for a warrior. However, that does not enable a woman to be recognized as a warrior. If a woman wishes to become a warrior then she must be three levels above, on the level of a centurion.”

Even in Uppasala, fighting was considered a man’s job, which meant that women who were only of average ability were pressured into traditional female roles. There were enough men around to fill the roles of warriors, while women were the only ones capable of bearing children. Therefore, the logic was that women should fulfill womanly roles.

However, there were the rare few who possessed such strength and skill that it was seen to be a waste to relegate them to such roles. There were women who far outstripped the average man, and only those women were seen by king and country to be more valuable as warriors than as women and permitted to become warriors.

Female warriors in Uppasala were literally superior to men, so much so that they would be able to overwhelmingly defeat the average man.

“I see...” Zenjirou murmured, understanding.

Considering how much Freya disliked being shut away, he could easily imagine her attraction to the title of warrior. Therefore, he could also see why she would be thrilled about being allowed to offer up her own kill as a meal, which only warriors could do back home.

He sat down on a good-sized stump and looked around. The meal was quite similar to what he’d had on a camping trip during middle school, and most of the people participating were the men responsible for guarding him. The dinner was being held as thanks for their efforts, so only a few nobles had been invited: Nilda Gaziel, as she was responsible for the annex, and a few of the Gaziel family’s retainers.

The region was in the midst of preparing for the wedding, so royalty holding a massive party would be nothing but a nuisance. It meant that Zenjirou had much less tiring conversation to deal with, so he appreciated the break.

“Sir Zenjirou, thank you for your invitation today,” a slight girl—Nilda Gaziel—said to him as he relaxed.

Her dark, round eyes were sparkling as she lifted the hem of her dress in a curtsy.

“Well, I am not the one hosting here; Princess Freya is. The main course is from the meat drake that she brought down herself. I hope you enjoy it.”

“Princess Freya gave me a portion not long ago. It was delicious,” she answered with a smile. The grin didn’t look forced. The skewers were made of smoked meat with large amounts of salt and spices, so they were rather rustic, but she must have genuinely enjoyed them.

“The princess is a braver woman than I,” she continued. “I saw a wild meat drake when I lived in the village, but I can’t imagine standing against one.”

As Nilda shook her head, commenting on how she would freeze up, Zenjirou twitched.

“You lived in the village?”

“I did. I was brought up there. My father found and acknowledged me as a Gaziel when I was nine.”

“I see...”

So that meant the lord of the fiefdom had lain with a woman in the general population and unintentionally had an illegitimate child. If that were true, it would have been a rather complicated upbringing for her, but the girl’s expression didn’t imply she was troubled.

Was she born this easygoing or is she just blessed with the people around her here and in the village?

Nilda continued with a friendly smile, unaware of his thoughts. “The domesticated drakes have been a great benefit to me, but even the relatively docile ones are scary, so I respect someone who is able to stand up to a wild drake even more.”

Her eyes were, as she said, full of respect. At some point, all her nerves and wariness had vanished, and her friendly chattering prompted a rueful smile from Zenjirou even as he chose his words to chide her.

“Princess Freya is incredible, that is true. But, Nilda, even praise would be best not spread too widely, so openly and emotionally. There are a large number of people in society who might take offense to it, and it can be taken as some kind of pledge depending on the circumstances.”

“Thank you for the warning, Sir Zenjirou. I will be more careful in the future,” Nilda said, slumping at his words. That slump was the very thing he was warning her of.

Well, that makes me pretty sure she doesn’t come from a noble family, at least, Zenjirou inferred as he watched her expression change rapidly.

A slightly closer eye on Nilda let him see the slight unnaturalness to her actions and way of speaking. It was something they had in common—a slight disconnect caused by their behavior as nobles being a conscious task.

Still, this seems a bit risky. She's so open and friendly. Will it cause issues? She is a noble's daughter...

She'd started out clearly tense and wary, but all of that had vanished with the meal. She was almost like a puppy now.

If this was Margrave Gaziel's goal, then it sure is some plan. Ines said he wasn't like that, though.

His estimation of the family was growing quickly through his interactions with Nilda. The fact that she was interacting with royalty without any real concern despite only becoming nobility herself later in life meant that the Gaziels were unlikely to treat her harshly. Zenjirou liked interacting with people who were openly emotional, so if it was intentional, it was a big deal.

“Sir Zenjirou, the capital is a big city, right? I've heard that the palace is beautiful, but what is it actually like?”

“Well, I haven't really been out of the palaces, so I cannot give you an objective answer, but I think it is indeed beautiful. The building is sturdy but elegant, made entirely of white stone. The gardens are looked after by experts who grow gorgeous plants, and there are fountains and reservoirs full of clear water. Part of the reservoir has freshwater fish to gaze at. The clarity means that when the golden fish swim around, it looks like the surface is sparkling in gold. It's a sight I think well worth seeing.”

“Oh, wow! I want to go and see it!”

Zenjirou now had a rather strong sense of the two palaces as his home, so her blunt admiration was both something he was glad to see but also slightly embarrassing.

“Will you go to the capital in the future?” he asked. “The Gaziel family has an estate there, after all.”

“The Gaziel family has a tendency to focus more on its own lands, so only the bare minimum of people are stationed there. I'm not of age either, so I haven't

been able to leave here yet. But I turned fifteen this year, so I should be able to go!”

“I see. Unfortunately, I can hardly offer you a tour of the capital, considering my position, but I can do so for the palace. If you do come to the capital, then I’d be happy to show you around.”

It was exceedingly rare for Zenjirou to make such a promise, but Nilda’s openness had kindled a protective urge in him.

“I look forward to it!” she answered with an unfettered smile.

While Freya had been busily serving up the meat to everyone, now that she’d finished giving her own greetings to their guests, she could take some time for herself.

“Well done, Princess Freya. Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves,” Zenjirou said, standing to greet her as she approached with a triumphant smile.

“Thank you, Sir Zenjirou. May I sit next to you?”

The silver-haired princess took a sip from a chalice of fruit liquor she had taken from Ines’s offered tray and smiled brilliantly at him.

He couldn’t hide his uncertainty. He wasn’t sitting on anything as refined as a bench, just a relatively big tree stump, so “next” to him wasn’t a neighboring seat, but rather them sharing the stump. It was a rather daring proposal, but refusing would be poor manners.

He smiled and took off his vest, using it to cover the stump he’d been sitting on.

“Of course, Princess. Here.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Big for a tree stump though it was, two people sitting on it meant that they were close enough to feel each other’s warmth. The hem of her dress touched Zenjirou’s leg. The two of them were so close, it was more comfortable for him to rest his right arm on the other side of her waist.

The two of them sat there in silence together. The flames tinged her silver hair and pale skin red. Zenjirou found his gaze unconsciously fixed on her, and

she tilted her head slightly before smiling at him.

“Your Majesty, thank you for tonight. I need to say it again: thanks to you, one of my dreams has been fulfilled.”

The fire-tinged smile wasn’t a polite mask indispensable to many politicians, but a heartfelt representation of her feelings on her face.

“If you enjoyed it, then all the better. I suppose your motherland’s laws have no real bearing on the Southern Continent, so you may as well behave as you wish.”

“You’ve spoken with Skaji. It is a rather childish desire, so that is slightly embarrassing. It really was exciting, though. Bringing down a drake with my own two hands and serving it to the soldiers for a feast almost makes me feel like I’m one of the heroes from ancient times.”

Even the Southern Continent’s domesticated drakes were legendary, creatures never seen unless you were deep in the mountains and far from human civilization. With that in mind, ending one of their lives with your own spear and serving it up certainly had the makings of an epic. Zenjirou did not have the ability or courage to do it, and therefore had no intention of trying, but he could understand Freya’s feelings.

“Your heart and initiative are impressive. I’m certain that your fortitude was what enabled your intercontinental trip as well.”

She chuckled. “My brother calls me rash and hyperactive. Still, I did my best. I learned how to wield a bow and spear, and how to camp. While we were at sea I learned how to tie knots, climb rope ladders, and cast useful magic for long sea voyages, like water manipulation and purification. They’re all worse than useless for a life shut away.”

“It’s because of that effort that you’ve crossed the sea and were able to make it to the Southern Continent, though. That knowledge and those skills are treasures that will last a lifetime.”

While he was phrasing it that way to console her, his words did come from the heart. Capua was even more gender-restrictive than Freya’s homeland, but Zenjirou was married to Aura, who was an exception even among exceptions,

so he hadn't really been around all that himself. From his perspective, learning how to fight, even if it was the bare minimum along with learning seamanship was praiseworthy. After all, if he had considered combat ability and an active lifestyle to be a detriment, he wouldn't have fallen for Aura in the first place.

Freya seemed to understand that he wasn't just giving her lip service. "Thank you, Your Majesty. While it is embarrassing, I love it. Running through the hills with a spear in hand and sailing off across the seas... I am well aware that it puts me at odds with others' views of the world, so I don't hold the frowns and admonishments against anyone. Still, I've had no greater joy than someone affirming the effort and love I have for that life."

"That response almost makes me feel embarrassed," he replied with a laugh. "Regardless, it was the truth."

Before they knew it, the man from another world and the woman from across the sea forgot that they were sitting so close and simply kept the conversation going with smiles on their faces.



It was easy to see when the meal ended. The skewered meat and vegetables disappeared, and the number of empty wine casks had increased as the flames died down. Everyone could tell that the night was drawing to a close.

The boisterous laughter and off-key singing that had filled the area thus far had died out, and the conversation was much quieter.

A clanging of a large bell suddenly broke the relative quiet of the night.

"Ines?" Zenjirou asked, immediately rising from the stump. The woman behind him maintained her composed expression as she shook her head.

"It sounds like it came from the main building, though I am unaware of the specifics. Judging by Lady Nilda's reaction, it doesn't seem to be an emergency."

Zenjirou reflexively turned to Nilda, and while she was indeed surprised, she wasn't particularly panicked or fearful. She noticed his gaze and trotted over.

"My apologies for the late report, Sir Zenjirou. That bell was to notify of a visitor at the front gate," she told him before turning to a soldier. "You there, go

to the main building and ask for the details.”

“At once,” the soldier answered before hurrying off.

“A visitor at this time of night?” Zenjirou asked.

His surprise was understandable. The Gaziel family was currently a gathering of much of the country’s nobility for the wedding, so visitors in and of themselves were no shock. However, it was unlikely for someone to arrive at this time of night. After all, moving around at night was dangerous in many ways. It would be one thing if the wedding were tomorrow, but they had days’ worth of leeway, so travelers would normally camp overnight and head out in the morning.

While Zenjirou was considering that, the soldier returned from the main estate. He was running quickly as he called out his report.

“A delegation from the Kingdom of Nabara has arrived!”

“Nabara?” Zenjirou murmured. The name was familiar to him, and he searched his memory for why.

Nabara was a country in the western part of the Southern Continent. There were steep mountains acting as a buffer between it and Capua. This territory was the one that bordered those mountains. Therefore, you could say that Nabara was a neighboring territory, separated only by a mountain range.

It wasn’t exactly normal for a delegation to be sent to a marriage between domestic nobles, but neither was it rare in the case of feudalistic countries. That was because feudal lords on the level of margraves were able to conduct diplomacy with neighboring countries to a certain extent.

Remembering those circumstances, Zenjirou could see what was happening.

“I see. If they came from Nabara, they could arrive within the day if they traveled through the night.”

The mountains between the two countries were dangerous both in terms of terrain and the drakes that inhabited them. If you were only going to stop for a single night, it was indeed less risky to travel through the night instead.

While Zenjirou was satisfied by that explanation, the soldier continued

without waiting to catch his breath.

“Further, their representative is General Martin Nadal!”

The effect of the name was dramatic. The garden fell immediately silent before suddenly erupting into shock.

“General Martin?!”

“Impossible! What of his own lands’ protection?!”

“Perhaps that is how wary they are of Margrave Gaziel and General Pujol aligning themselves together.”

Both the soldiers Zenjirou had brought and the local men, along with Gaziel family’s vassals, were all blatantly shocked and speaking freely. The only exceptions were those who had not heard the name before—a puzzled Freya and Skaji—and Ines, whose placid expression didn’t falter.

Surveying everyone’s reaction, Zenjirou relied on Ines to fill in the gaps.

“Ines, who is General Martin?”

“Martin Nadal is the commander in chief of Nabara’s army. He accomplished much in the recent war, and while Nabara cannot be said to be a particularly strong country, militarily, he is said to be much of the reason they made it through.”

The maid had probably predicted his question, as she answered with a calm expression. It was a higher estimation of the man than Zenjirou had expected, so his eyes went wide in surprise.

“So he has a similar position to General Pujol?”

The maid gave an easy nod. “Indeed, General Martin is on par with General Pujol.”

“Huh?”

The wording took him aback. The general wasn’t *said* to be on par with General Pujol, and nor was he *known* to be on par. The upfront statement made him look askance at her.

“To put it bluntly, he is the one who gave General Pujol the scars across his

forehead and cheek,” she explained.

“I see,” Zenjirou answered after a moment.

With the arrival of a far more important person than he had expected, Zenjirou abandoned his wishful thinking that this wedding would end without incident.

Chapter 2 — The Wedding

General Martin Nadal was a man just past forty, still in the prime of his life. He was revered as Nabara's guardian deity, and his appearance was well suited to the title. The man was close to 190 centimeters in height and easily more than a hundred kilos in weight.

While he was shorter than General Pujol—who was himself nearly two meters—he was broader. Of course, it wasn't fat. He was a solid mass of tempered muscle and didn't seem as old as he actually was. Yet, despite his boarlike build, his gait was closer to that of a panther in its grace.

Martin sat down in a seat in the room lent to him in the Gaziel estate and let out a bitter laugh.

"Good grief, Capua never changes. I suppose in this case I should credit the Gaziel family. Either way, we cannot underestimate them."

The young knight behind him faltered at the statement, which could be taken as one of fear, from his country's hero.

"Your Excellency, what do you mean? I *do* understand that Capua is several times stronger than us."

Martin turned to the young knight and smiled broadly. "Hmm, you cannot tell? Look at this chair and desk. Despite my frame, the chair hasn't made a squeak and is, in fact, perfectly comfortable. The height of the desk is perfect as well. And there was barely any delay between my arrival and being guided to this room."

The younger knight could understand the implicit thrust of the statement. "So there's been a leak? They knew you would be our representative to the wedding."

The large soldier with more than a hundred kilos of body mass would never suit a normal chair. Simply sitting down normally caused disconcerting creaks, and a chair with armrests too close together would not be able to contain his

boulderlike behind and would give in.

However, the chair he was using had neither of those issues. While it was simple and unadorned wood, it remained solid as the general dropped his bulk into it and was a perfect fit in terms of height and size.

“Well, it may be that the presumption was made rather than there being a leak. There are few who lack knowledge of the relationship between General Pujol and me.”

As he spoke, the general unconsciously scratched at a scar on his broad chest through his clothes. It was one General Pujol had given him in the war. While Martin wasn't strongly attached to such things, he could not remain unaffected by the name Pujol Guillén.

“Perhaps it was at his instruction? No, this is nothing more than the home of his bride; he would have no right as yet to make those decisions. That would then mean it was the margrave's decision, but such consideration seems rather unlikely from one such as he. Therefore there must be some other wise person making the decisions...”

The giant general was pulled from his thoughts when he noticed the young knight's focus.

“Hm, what is it?” he asked.

The knight had been staring at a corner of the table the whole time, and the general didn't know why. The corner he had been looking at held a small oblong box, filled with cinnamon sugar that had been compressed into sticks. They were of no interest to the general as he wasn't fond of sweet things, but despite the young knight's tough appearance, he had a weakness for sweets and could not ignore them.

“Ah, it's nothing,” the knight answered, purposefully moving his gaze away and clearing his throat.

“You have a real soft spot for the sweeter things,” the general answered with an amused chuckle.

“Is that a bad thing?” the younger man asked after a moment, his cheeks slightly flushed with embarrassment as he pursed his lips.

“Hardly. I just dislike them.”

“Well, I like them.”

“Exactly. That is the issue. Why would food that I dislike but you have a weakness for be provided in this room?”

“Huh?” This time, the young knight was lost for words.

Martin continued as his companion’s expression changed, his easy smile remaining in place. “Precisely. It is exceedingly rare for men to like such sweet things. I will not say that it never happens, but there’s a high possibility that it was targeting you, Christiano Pinto,” the former war hero said, finally speaking the younger knight’s name.

“You are one thing, Your Excellency, but would Capua really know someone like me?”

“Come now, Chris, ‘like me’ is unfair. I would be unsurprised if the more knowledgeable on the Southern Continent knew your name.”

That wasn’t an exaggeration. While Christiano was still under twenty, he was already a commander directly under the general. Part of that was due to his strong blood ties to the royal family through the Pinto line and his heirship to that family, but a large part of it was due to his martial abilities.

A good lineage wouldn’t be enough for General Martin to take notice. He had worked his way up from a lower class of knight, so he had a more meritocratic approach in addition to having a tendency to mock lineage. The general saw the youth as a potential for the country’s next shield. That said, the only foreigners who had their eyes on him would doubtless be the most sharp-sighted.

“A country is not a great country due to its size, nor due to its population. It is a great country due to having the capability and manpower to *maintain* its territory and population. You must never forget that.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

The Nabaran general and his apprentice both reaffirmed their wariness towards Capua.



Meanwhile, the Gaziel household was in full swing, busy with preparations for the impending wedding and dealing with the guests.

Of course, that wasn't strange in the slightest. A wedding between high-ranking nobles was a major event.

"Lady Lucinda, your clothes for the wedding have been prepared. Please try them on."

"Understood. Ready them in the next room. I will do so when we're done here."

"Lady Lucinda, it appears that Sir Zenjirou's meal in the annex has finished without incident. Lady Nilda reports there were no real issues."

"I see. Send her to me before she retires for the night. I wish to hear the report directly from her, just in case."

"Lady Lucinda, the delegation from Nabara has been shown to their room. They currently do not seem to have any complaints."

"That is fortunate. While we cannot establish a hierarchy between our guests, an issue with dignitaries from another country could become a diplomatic incident. Exercise due care and attention with the Nabaran delegation."

The strangest part of the scene was the person reigning over the organized chaos. Lucinda Gaziel, the very woman who would be married in several days, was in charge.

The margrave himself spent his days in the capital, so she handled the general running of the march, and that continued even now.

Lucinda Gaziel was a woman who had remained unmarried until she was twenty-six in a country that considered *twenty* to be a late age to marry. You might therefore imagine that she was exceptionally plain or hot-tempered. However, she didn't have any of those problems.

She had fairly unpronounced features, so you could certainly call her plain-faced, but that was no impediment to seeing her as a refined woman. Coupled with how the servants trusted her, you could tell there was no issue with her personality.

If pressed, you could say that dealing with the running of the march while being a woman was a slight deviation from the Southern Continent's norms, but Lucinda never strayed from it, acting in her father's place or until her brother could inherit. It was different from outliers like Aura, who could wield the power of the country despite being a woman, or Freya, who took her life into her hands to cross the ocean. It was showing her competence in a way that allowed her to be a woman even as she proved herself as talented as a man.

She had initially missed the chance to marry due to the war, so she had simply cared for their territory and her brother on behalf of her family instead. She had nothing in common with other women who had "missed the boat."

Now that she'd finished listening to the reports, she calmly arranged them on the table with a calmness that was rather unusual for a noble on the verge of a wedding.

"The representative from Nabara was indeed General Martin as we predicted, although the Knight Leader Chris accompanying him was a surprise. Did the sweets make it in time?"

"They did. They were placed in the room before they arrived."

"Thank you. Good work."

It had been Lucinda who had predicted that General Martin would be representing Nabara and ordered suitable furniture for him. It had also been she who had acquired the information that Knight Leader Chris liked sweet things and made sure that confectionery was prepared beforehand. After all, she had been acting in her father's place, so she'd placed a significant priority on gaining information about their neighboring country.

While to Capua as a whole, Nabara was a middling kingdom barely worth any concern, it was more than enough to be wary of for the Gaziel march itself. Thus, Lucinda was just as wary of Nabara as Martin was of Capua.

"I have heard that despite his appearance as a man of war, the general is particularly attentive to detail. I presume he won't fail to notice the significance of both the furniture and the confectionery. Hopefully, it will keep him in check," she murmured, putting the dragon bone pen in her right hand back on its stand.

As the general had realized, the furniture and snacks matching the younger knight's tastes were both due to a message from her. It served as an unspoken "This is how well we know your movements."

Lucinda would be marrying, which meant she would no longer be dealing with the running of the march. Of course, she had started preparing her successor as soon as her marriage had been decided. She had taught her younger brother, Xavier—the heir—and vassals at the retainer level how to do the necessary jobs, along with introducing them to as many representatives of the fiefdom as possible to pass on the information network she had thus far built.

It was nothing more than a stopgap, but that was unavoidable due to how quickly it had all happened for a noble's wedding. After she left, the territory would be in some degree of disarray, so her plan was to warn their neighbors against trying to take advantage of that confusion.

"I certainly appreciate Sir Zenjirou's consideration, given how chaotic things are, though. I will need to thank him in the future."

The consideration in question was the prince consort's statement that he was looking forward to seeing the couple *on their wedding day*. It was a statement that they needn't concern themselves with him until the day itself, which meant that the guest who would usually require the most attention could be lodged in the annex with a bare minimum of personnel.

Without that, if he had done the normal for a royal and given his greetings around the region along with his blessing to the bride as quickly as possible, they wouldn't have had the ability to keep up with everything.

Lucinda shuddered at the terrifying mental image as the door opened and shut with a clunk.

"Excuse me, sister, I have just returned from patrol," said the margrave's heir, Xavier Gaziel, as he entered. He was clad in leather armor despite the late hour and had a short sword hanging from his slim waist.

"Good work, Xavier. Is the town peaceful?"

The siblings sat on sofas facing each other.

"It is. There were no issues worthy of mention. Everyone is thrilled with your

wedding,” he reported proudly, straightening in his seat.

Xavier’s mother had died when he was very young, so Lucinda was more of a mother to him than a sister, and he was happier than anyone that she was able to get married now despite originally missing her chance.

Seeing her brother so happy, as if it were his own wedding, Lucinda shrugged in slight embarrassment and moved the conversation along with a touch of hurriedness, hiding her feelings.

“I see. That is good to hear. Were there fights between people who overindulged?”

Xavier’s face turned slightly conflicted at her question. “It was fairly common. Perhaps it would have been better to forbid it?”

“No, forbidding alcohol while celebrating a marriage from the margrave’s family would have been tactless. We should continue as we are, cracking down on those who overindulge and cause problems. However, it may cause issues with other noble houses, so ensure that no one is allowed to approach the estate without permission.”

“Understood, sister!” her brother said, following her suggestions without question. It was a somewhat complicated relationship, considering he would become the next margrave himself.

“I was uneasy about leaving the march so suddenly to marry, but perhaps it is for the best,” she murmured. “If I remain here any longer, we would be setting ourselves up for problems.”

“Did you say something?” Xavier asked.

“No, simply talking to myself,” she said, deflecting his question and sighing internally.

If she was still here when Xavier inherited the position then it would definitely cause the march’s influence to fracture. At least internally, the vassals and influential commoners all trusted Lucinda more than Xavier, and Xavier himself was fixated on her. There was a possibility that if she remained here as a spinster and Xavier married, the two women would not get on and cause order in the march to fall apart.

Even if avoiding such a situation was all her marriage accomplished, Lucinda saw it as being worthwhile. In fact, this was a good opportunity to pass on some final words of advice.

“Xavier, I will soon be wedding General Pujol and leaving the march.”

“Right, I’m so happy for you!”

Lucinda had to smile ruefully at his teary-eyed joy. “Thank you. But this is my last opportunity to give you advice solely from my heart purely out of concern for you, so listen well.” As she spoke, her normal soft smile morphed into a look of deadly seriousness.

“R-Right,” he answered, reflexively stiffening and clenching his fists on his lap. The saying “the child is father to the man” was a common one, and Xavier had grown up with his sister acting as his mother, so he couldn’t interact with her as an equal.

“Once I marry General Pujol, you cannot take my words on board as easily as you have thus far.”

“Sister?”

While her brother was lost for words, she forged on ahead. “The moment I am wed, I shall no longer be a member of the Gaziel family, but of the Guilléns. Therefore, my first priority will become the Guillén family, with the Gaziel family being second. I will be from another family, and you will not be able to take my words at face value.”

“You... I...”

While Xavier was shaken, she was right. After marriage, the family a woman married into became her first priority and she would take on their customs. At least, with the importance that nobility placed on the household, that was the normal outlook.

Of course, that was simply an ideal, and people who could completely do that were rare. There were far more who couldn’t quite shake their allegiances to their birth family. Fatima Guillén would be the perfect example of such a person. It was difficult to imagine her prioritizing her new family, considering how much she fawned over her brother.

However, Lucinda didn't quite match that prevailing view either. With her marriage, she would do her utmost as a noblewoman for her new family. She saw that as completely natural. If anything, she was almost an example of a lack of human kindness.

"So you'll be a political opponent from now on?" he asked, paling.

Seeing his expression, Lucinda regretted not explaining well enough. Purposefully softening her expression, she used her usual gentle tone to soothe her brother's fears.

"It is nothing so exaggerated. The Gaziel and Guillén families are not antagonistic to begin with, and my marriage will make that relationship even better. In truth, it is almost impossible that I will work against the Gaziel family and cause you to fall."

"That's right!"

The phrase "change of tune" was perfect as his stricken expression instantly morphed into a happy smile. Lucinda smiled back, conflicted.

"Marriage is a type of contract for nobility, though, and I will need to act with the benefit to the Guillén family at the front of my mind. However, I retain the right to act in the interests of the Gaziel family if it doesn't cause conflict with the Guilléns' needs."

Marrying resulting in the wife no longer caring about her family was too much for the family providing the bride; therefore, as long as it didn't interfere with the interests of the family she was marrying into, a wife was allowed to accommodate her maiden family. Xavier listened meekly to his sister's explanation.

"Considering the current state of Capua and the respective positions of our families, it is highly unlikely that the Guilléns will act to the detriment of the Gaziels. However, there are no guarantees for the future. If the two families have mutually incompatible goals, I will need to act for the benefit of the Guillén family, regardless of its impact on this family. You need to keep that in mind, do you understand?"

"I do...sister," he nodded meekly at her warning.



Several days later, there had been no real issues as the day of the wedding arrived. It would take place in the reception hall of the main building. It wasn't as lavish as the location of Zenjirou and Aura's wedding in the royal palace, but it was similar in size.

Multiple round tables had been brought into the hall, and each had chairs for the invited nobles. Zenjirou was one of those guests, of course. He was joined at his table by his partner, Freya, her confidante, Skaji, and his bodyguard, Natalio.

Ines was in her usual uniform standing behind him. Weddings in Capua were not all that formal, as the time before the couple's arrival was being spent drinking and chatting.

"So this is a typical Southern Continent wedding? It seems to not be all that different from the North," Freya commented, sipping at a chalice of fruit juice with a smile.

"Oh, it isn't? I have to admit that I am not particularly knowledgeable of the customs on this continent, but I have heard that they used to be held while sitting on a soft carpet. Perhaps the current tendency for all the guests to have chairs and a seat at a table is a result of practices from the North spreading here," Zenjirou answered.

"That seems likely. In which case, I would like to thank whoever brought the custom here."

Zenjirou noticed something in her wording and his voice took on a teasing tone. "So you aren't accustomed to sitting on a carpet, Princess Freya?"

"No, to my shame," she answered with an embarrassed pout at his guess.

Even on the Southern Continent, sitting directly on the floor was becoming a thing of the past, but the tradition had not entirely died out. There were several functions where the attendees were required to sit on the floor, and many of the more traditional nobles didn't even have chairs or a table in their dining rooms, instead taking their meals with the plates lined up on the carpet.

Because of that, most Capuan nobles were used to sitting on the floor to an

extent, but with Freya being from the Northern Continent, she clearly was not.

For his part, Zenjirou had adapted relatively easily to it. Even though there were many more circumstances in modern Japan where you'd be seated on a chair at a table, there were still plenty of opportunities, like tatami-floored rooms, where you would sit down cross-legged. Due to that, he had been able to attend functions lacking tables or chairs without too much discomfort.

If Freya really does become my concubine, will she struggle with those types of events?

While he had the concern in mind, he didn't voice it. Discussing what things would be like if she were his concubine could be taken as a commitment. Things around him were already progressing in a favorable direction for that outcome, and although he might not be able to do anything to *stop* that progression, he wasn't obliged to accelerate it either.

The considerations went through his mind as a loud gong suddenly echoed through the hall.

"Oh."

"It seems to be starting."

The gong drew everyone's attention from their conversations as the betrothed couple came through the door.

The groom, Pujol Guillén, was the first to appear. The general was clad in a dress uniform with a decorative sword hanging at his waist as he strode across the red carpet. It was very much like him to forgo the traditional attire for a military uniform, even for his wedding. In fact, it was what he looked best in.

His nearly two-meter frame, weighing in at over a hundred kilos, was wrapped in the gold-threaded uniform as he stood, the manifestation of people's image of the title "General."

A woman in her late twenties was the next to appear, wearing a long, white dress. This was Zenjirou's first time seeing her, but it was doubtless the bride, Lucinda Gaziel.

Her position a step behind and to the side of the general as they walked was

itself the correct formation for husband and wife. Zenjirou and Aura's wedding was one between a queen and prince consort, so both of them had walked side by side, but that was an extreme exception. In a Capuan wedding, this would usually be how the bride and groom came into the room.

The groom, Pujol, and the bride, Lucinda. Pujol was far more attention-grabbing, but Zenjirou was focused on Lucinda, this being their first encounter.

So, this is Lucinda. She isn't extravagant, but she definitely is pretty, he thought.



She seemed small walking behind the general considering his own immense height, but she was probably about average. She had thick, glossy black hair and soft, dark eyes. Her skin was a typical shade for a Capuan. The plain white dress she was wearing made her appear even more unremarkable, but if you were asked to make a judgment on whether she was beautiful or not, she had such beauty that a mere glance made it clear. A kind way of putting it would be calling her “prim,” while a less generous adjective would be “impersonal.”

The couple arrived at the dais as Zenjirou considered all of that. An older priest was waiting there to carry out the ceremony. The main religion on the Southern Continent was a form of animism and wasn’t particularly organized. Due to that, priests were only really involved in events like this.

The bearded priest turned to the couple and began to speak. “We are here under the watchful eyes of the many spirits for you to enter into a union as man and woman. May your futures be blessed by those spirits,” he said. “Since time immemorial, the courageous man has protected his weaker woman with his broad back even as the gentle woman guides a foolish man with her heart. The spirits will answer the feelings in your hearts.”

The lack of any real systematic organization in the religion meant that the benedictions for these occasions were left largely up to the individuals. Zenjirou was listening with great interest as the priest continued with his own blessings, but he suddenly felt uneasy. He kept his gaze on the couple even as he moved his attention around the room.

What? I can feel someone watching me...but who?

He could only see from the corner of his eye, so he wasn’t able to make out the details, but it seemed to be a large, militaristic figure.

I’m pretty sure that’s the seating for the foreign guests, so that must be...General Martin from Nabara?

In fact, it wasn’t Martin but the knight next to him, Chris, but Zenjirou wasn’t able to tell as he had his eyes still focused on the couple.

Besides, the younger knight was a full ten centimeters shorter than his superior, so he was far less noticeable.

While he was somewhat bewildered about being the center of someone's attention at a wedding rather than his watcher focusing on the couple being married, he realized after a moment that it wasn't that surprising. Zenjirou was Capua's prince consort and was a full-fledged royal who had inherited the lineal magic of the family. He could understand why the leaders of other countries would be more focused on him than the bride and groom.

As that had taken place, the ceremony had continued. The priest had finished his thanks and blessings. The vows had been given, but the slight departure from the standard Capuan wedding was this last act.

"Now, if the bride and groom would exchange their rings..."

An exchange of rings was a relatively unheard of custom, and the hall was filled with murmurs as Zenjirou's eyes widened slightly in surprise. In that instant, Pujol's eyes found his as his lips lifted into a smile, his eyes expressing thanks.

Oh, I get it. Aura did say that me giving her the ring had started to popularize the idea throughout the country. I guess General Pujol is one of the people who picked up the custom.

Presumably, the general's look of thanks was for bringing the custom into their country.

As the audience looked on, the bride and groom took the rings they had entrusted to the priest and put them onto each other's fingers. The left ring finger being chosen wasn't because Zenjirou had mentioned the custom, but more because it was the finger a ring would be least in the way on.

The rings being plain gold with no precious gems was likely for the same reason. General Pujol was a military man, so decorations on his finger that would interfere with his movements were far from a positive, and a plain gold ring was most probably a compromise in that respect.

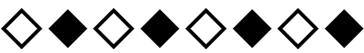
That might not really feel like enough to the woman, though. The tendency for women to have a fondness for large precious gems was the same in this world as on Earth.

Would bringing up engagement rings be a good idea? I guess a fancy

engagement ring would be something the woman would love but might end up as more of a burden for the man, so maybe it's best to just stick with the wedding rings for now.

Lucinda didn't appear to be in that majority, though, as she was smiling happily at the ring the general had put on her finger.

"Thank you, husband," she said, her voice somehow managing to reach all corners of the room.



There was a debut for marriages between nobles or the rich in Capua after the wedding itself. As the name implied, it was an opportunity for those who couldn't attend the ceremony to see the newly wedded couple and was also part of announcing the marriage. Those who had been invited to the main event refrained from attending it.

While the new couple was greeting the general populace in the estate's courtyard, the invitees were in a separate room having a buffet. The hosts were the bride's family—the Gaziels—but the groom's family were also acting as quasi-hosts.

"Sir Zenjirou, I lack the words to properly thank you for coming out so far for my daughter's wedding," said the margrave.

He was similar in height to Zenjirou, but much wider. His neck was thicker than his face and had enough muscle across his shoulders that they almost sloped. His arms were like tree trunks, and even Zenjirou's amateur evaluation could tell that he was an active soldier.

While he was somewhat overwhelmed, he didn't let it show and answered with a smile. "It requires no thanks, Margrave. Both the Gaziel and Guillén families are indispensable to our country's internal and external protection. As those two families tie themselves together in marriage, it is only natural that I arrive to represent Her Majesty." he made sure to stress that he was here as Aura's representative.

The margrave responded with a rare smile for nobility, one with no hidden depths. "You honor me more than I deserve. While I also owe Lord Pujol thanks

for taking my daughter as his bride even after my own inadequacy resulted in her missing her chance, I must offer even greater thanks to Her Majesty for allowing the marriage between our families against tradition. I, Miguel Gaziel, will remember this for as long as I live.”

“I would imagine that it is due to the steadfast effort your family has shown in working for the good of the country. Her Majesty would like nothing more than for you to maintain that position.”

“I shall, of course, bear that always in mind,” Miguel answered with a deep bow of his head.

Zenjirou’s statement was a warning that although they may now be related through marriage to the central nobles, the margrave mustn’t use it as the impetus to cause a power struggle. It was true that Aura trusted the margrave, though. Of course, like all of the more remote nobles, he had a tendency to put his family and territory first, and the country second, but the family was known as one of the most honest and dutiful families in the kingdom. It was a good thing indeed that the Gaziel army had followed the throne’s commands without issue. Other than the Lara family, who were at least partially related to Aura, the Gaziels could certainly be said to be who she put the most faith in.

“Well, this is an event to be celebrated,” Zenjirou stated. “Let us leave the formalities for now, and I shall introduce you to everyone. This is Princess Freya Uppasala, first princess of the Kingdom of Uppasala. She has accompanied me here as my partner in place of Her Majesty, as the latter is unable to leave the capital. Princess Freya, this is Margrave Gaziel. Much of his work is undertaken in the capital, so you may have already met him?”

The Northern Continent’s princess—who had thus far been waiting politely a step behind and to the side of Zenjirou—now took a step forward.

“I am Freya Uppasala. My congratulations on your daughter’s marriage, Margrave Gaziel,” she said, politely lifting the hem of her simple blue dress in a curtsy.

There were slight differences in etiquette in Uppasala and Capua, but her manners were refined enough that pointing out those differences felt almost boorish.

“My thanks, Princess Freya. As you can see, this is simply a rural town, but please relax here.”

While the margrave was respectful, Zenjirou, unfortunately, couldn't tell whether that was towards her position as a princess on the Northern Continent or as a candidate for concubine of the prince consort.

“Thank you, Margrave. Your family's care in the annex has been thorough, and it has been an immensely pleasant stay, has it not, Your Majesty?”

“It has indeed.”

She'd most likely brought it up along with the smile in his direction to ensure that people around them knew they had been lodging in the same building.

“It is a relief to hear that. Good work, Nilda,” the margrave answered—whether he knew of her goal or not—before addressing his daughter by name.

“Thank you, father,” the younger girl answered before directing her large round eyes to Freya and bowing her head. “It is an honor to hear you say that.”

There was a hint of nervousness in her behavior. However, her tendency to act like a friendly puppy made the atmosphere much more comfortable. Even the margrave's face softened as he turned to face her, and Zenjirou, at least, could see no sign of a plot involving her.

She was sitting with all of the other family members at the wedding, so I guess the Gaziels aren't exactly trying to hide her. It's getting stranger and stranger.

The feudal lord had treated the girl like family, despite the queen having no knowledge of her, and had even assigned her to care for their royal guests. Zenjirou had the feeling the truth was nothing special and just a case of crossed wires. Besides, both Nilda and the margrave seemed too upfront for this to be some kind of plot.

“That reminds me, I heard that Lady Nilda here has a different mother than Lord Xavier or Lady Lucinda,” Zenjirou asked, just in case.

The margrave scratched his whitened hair in apparent embarrassment but confirmed it honestly. “You are quite right. Xavier and Lucinda are both from my wife, as were my eldest and second sons before they died in the war. As for

Nilda...well, I have a few too many years under my belt to call it a youthful indiscretion, but she was the result of a liaison with a woman from the fiefdom.”

As he spoke, the man softly ruffled the girl’s hair. She giggled at the action, her eyes drifting partially closed like a puppy.

Calling your own child a “youthful indiscretion” would have been rather rude in modern society, but Nilda seemed unbothered by it. Whether it was due to the gulf in cultural norms or the emotional connection between the two, the awkward phrasing didn’t seem to upset her.

Seeing the margrave’s actions, Zenjirou felt it was more the latter. “While Princess Freya has already said as much, Lady Nilda has been a great help in the annex. She is always bright and cheerful, and it does my own heart good. It has made our stay all the more enjoyable, so allow me to once again offer my thanks here. Thank you, Lady Nilda.”

“It is an honor, Sir Zenjirou,” she replied.

Whatever the circumstances, he decided that anything more without Aura’s judgment on the matter of Nilda Gaziel was pointless, so Zenjirou brought the conversation to an end. While he and Freya were the most important guests, the margrave was the bride’s father and could not spend the whole time with a single pair of guests.

As Zenjirou had expected, the other guests started approaching the margrave to exchange their own greetings as he and Freya moved on. Normal Capuan manners meant that someone of lower status could not normally open a conversation, but weddings and funerals were exceptions. The reasoning was that attendees at weddings were all there to celebrate the marriage, while attendees at funerals were all there to commemorate the dead. Therefore, despite the event being a buffet, Zenjirou was being kept busy enough that he barely had time to eat or drink as the surrounding nobles came to speak with him.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Zenjirou. I hold the position of viscount at Her Majesty’s pleasure. My name is Primo Guillén, the groom’s father’s younger brother,” said a man who looked to be in his fifties.

“Sir Zenjirou, thank you for coming all this way for my brother’s wedding,” added the tall woman at the viscount’s side.

The two of them both bowed their heads in unison. The man—Primo Guillén—was Pujol’s uncle, while the woman was his younger sister, Fatima Guillén.

“Lord Primo, thank you for your introduction. I am Her Majesty’s husband, Zenjirou. Lady Fatima, I am glad to see that you are in good health as well.”

Primo Guillén certainly showed his relation to the Guillén family, as he was a tall, though slender, man. He looked relatively small compared to Pujol’s nearly two-meter size, but he was visibly taller at a glance than the woman next to him, so he was at least in the latter half of the 180s. He didn’t have that same overwhelming presence as his nephew did, though. It perhaps sounded a little rude, but he was like an average man who happened to be tall. Indeed, Fatima drew far more attention at his side in the moss-green dress that she wore.

“I am, Sir Zenjirou,” she replied. “I was greatly relieved when my brother’s marriage was decided.”

She had a smile on her face as she spoke, but a closer look at her expression revealed a slight strain to it.

Well, she was always fawning over him, so I guess she would be extremely happy about him getting married.

Of course, the general’s new bride was also twenty-six. Given how the Southern Continent considered women over *twenty* to have missed their chance, she was well and truly past her prime. Fatima, without exaggeration, blindly accepted her brother as the greatest man on the Southern Continent, so his wife being past her prime would inevitably be a disappointment for her. The fact that she was doing her best not to show any of that in her behavior meant that she understood the importance of good relations with the Gaziel family. Then again, with Fatima, regardless of how unhappy she was inside, she would never dream of doubting her brother’s decisions.

“If you will excuse me, then, Sir Zenjirou.”

“It was good to see you, Sir Zenjirou.”

The two Guilléns made their excuses and left only to be replaced almost

immediately by the next visitor.

“It has been a while, Sir Zenjirou. You were a great help in Valentia,” a youth said. He was wearing the native dress of Capua, a friendly smile on his face.

“Ah, Lord Rafaello. Likewise,” Zenjirou answered the next head of the Márquez family—Rafaello Márquez—with a smile. At the same time, he glanced at Rafaello’s fiancée, who stood behind him.

Rafaello’s sharp eyes caught the look and he smiled brightly. “Allow me to introduce you, Sir Zenjirou. This is my fiancée, Kisha of the Massana family.” As he spoke, Rafaello put his arm around the dress-clad woman’s waist and guided her in front of Zenjirou.

Zenjirou found his gaze taken by the woman. Her long, glossy black hair was pulled together, and her red dress showed the lines of her shoulders enough to draw Zenjirou’s eyes in spite of how devoted a husband he was. She had long, balanced limbs and a confident smile on her alluringly beautiful face.

Kisha had been beautiful enough in her maid uniform, but the sleek dress made him give her a fond look.

“Kisha, I’ve never seen you in anything other than your uniform, but you truly are beautiful. Your beauty was evident even then, but you are captivating in that outfit.”

The woman’s eyes widened rather purposefully at her former liege’s words as she pouted slightly.

“My thanks, Sir Zenjirou. This *is* a surprise, though. I never expected you to praise my appearance. I was under the impression you had no interest in other women.”

“Not even I am made of stone, and I can appreciate beauty when I see it,” he answered, shrugging and letting the rueful smile show on his face.

The Capuan nobles watching stirred at that. It was exceedingly rare for Zenjirou to be so relaxed with a woman, and he had maintained an unassailable position at official events. Although Zenjirou didn’t realize it, this was an act that would increase the value people placed on the maids of the inner palace. It made them seem more likely to be able to act as connections to him.

While the surrounding nobles were evaluating that information, Rafaello Márquez—already having one of those former inner maids as his fiancée—smiled smoothly.

“If we may take our leave then, Sir Zenjirou?”

“Indeed, Lord Rafaello. Take care of Kisha.”

While Rafaello could have used his fiancée to keep the conversation going, he instead moved on. If anything, he had spent less time with Zenjirou than the other nobles. He was maintaining the stance he had suggested to his father of keeping his distance from the “monster” that Zenjirou represented.

The Gaziels, the Guilléns, and even the Márquezes were all important families that, even as royalty, Zenjirou could ill afford to slight. They were all domestic nobility, though, so he was aware of their temperaments to a degree and could patch things up after a few days if the worst came to pass.

Standing in front of him now was a noble he had none of those advantages with. General Martin Nadal from the Kingdom of Nabara and his attendant, Knight Leader Christiano Pinto.

Meeting with the foreigners had the guards at his and Freya’s backs tensing up. Ines was the only person involved who was relaxed.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Martin Nadal, and I hold the rank of general in the Kingdom of Nabara. It has been an honor to be granted the opportunity to make your acquaintance. This is a young knight of our army, Christiano.”

“I am the first son of the Pinto family, Knight Leader Christiano. It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty.”



The general in his forties and the younger knight—he looked to be in his late teens—both bowed their heads simultaneously. The two men were exceptions in that they had no women with them as partners. While it was usually preferable to attend a wedding as a couple if possible, there was no rule against attending alone. Their journey had effectively been a forced march through mountain trails, so there had been no women who could join them. With such clear reasons for it, their attending solo wasn't seen as a real problem.

“General Martin, I am glad to meet you as well. I am Queen Aura of the Kingdom of Capua's husband, Zenjirou. Even I have heard tell of your exploits. This is the first princess of the Northern Continent's Kingdom of Uppasala, Princess Freya Uppasala.”

“I am Freya. Unfortunately, due to hailing from the Northern Continent, I have not heard of your achievements. It is, however, an honor to meet you,” Freya said in response to Zenjirou's introduction with a slight bow of her head.

Zenjirou surveyed the two men as he put his left arm back around Freya's waist. *So this is Nabara's hero, General Martin? I figured he'd be pretty huge. Plus he's got more to him than just his build.*

Zenjirou had managed to keep a smile on his face and avoid showing any sign of faltering, but he felt an instinctive fear of the man standing before him. Considering he was standing his ground in front of a war hero who—while he was only about twenty centimeters taller—was almost double his weight, not backing down was a fair enough accomplishment. As a royal, he *did* have an ornamental bronze sword at his waist while the general was unarmed, but the gulf in combat ability between the two of them wouldn't be bridged so easily.

“It is an honor to meet you as well, Princess Freya.”

“I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Princess Freya.”

The general and younger knight both returned her greetings.

“Still, it was a surprise indeed that you would come to the wedding, General Martin. Can I assume that the only reason a general of your caliber would attend a wedding in your neighbor's lands would be due to the groom being General Pujol?”

In truth, rather than any surprise, he hadn't even known the general's name until recently, but he gave no indication of that. Regardless, the statement was in no way false. It wasn't exactly a rarity for a country to send a representative to a wedding between feudal lords in neighboring countries, but selecting their commander in chief for the role most certainly was unusual. It was practically inevitable for anyone who knew of the two generals' histories to make the same connection. The surrounding nobles pricked up their ears at his question.

Under all that scrutiny, the general simply shrugged with a broad smile. "Indeed, if I were to answer honestly, that would be the main reason. That said, Capua is an important neighbor to Nabara, so someone of similar rank would have attended if I had not."

The thing General Martin was most interested in was General Pujol's personality. It was well known that Pujol was ambitious. With such an ambitious man wedding a family that bordered their own lands, Nabara couldn't simply let it pass. The fact that the general had come to investigate personally was essentially a threat in itself.

Zenjirou kept up the pretense of not having noticed the conversation's undercurrent as he gave his own answer. "Good relations with our neighboring countries are important to maintain. I hope that we can put our efforts together to remember that fact."

"You are quite right, Your Majesty."

For Zenjirou's part, internal politics aside, he hadn't learned the balancing act necessary for international politics, so he had to keep up the impenetrable facade on that front. Naturally, the conversation avoided politics and slid towards personal matters.

"That reminds me, I must ask. While our countries are neighbors, does the food suit you? I have heard that it is no rarity for such cultural points to be utterly different even between neighbors."

"Indeed. I myself am unaware of specific differences, but as far as I can see there is no major difference. If I had to point out one thing, it would be the fruit liquor. Many more of the varieties here are much sweeter than our own. It means that even Knight Leader Chris here will have a chalice or two. Isn't that

right, Chris?”

“Your Excellency, I...” the younger knight spluttered, glaring at his country’s beloved general.

A fair number of men with a sweet tooth were ashamed of their tastes, and it appeared that Chris was one of these. Of course, you could say there was some degree of acceptance, as he didn’t make a show of enjoying the harsher drinks on offer.

“We can hardly control our preferences. Even I avoid several herbs on my plate despite thinking it somewhat childish,” Zenjirou said, voicing his own embarrassment to attempt to ease the younger man’s mood. Unfortunately, the soldier wasn’t grown up enough to honestly accept that.

“I do apologize,” Chris said instead, the gaze making its way to Zenjirou even as the youth lowered his head. It must have felt like the two older men were using his tastes as an icebreaker.

Zenjirou decided that, considering his expression, continuing the topic wasn’t for the best, so he somewhat forcefully shifted direction.

“Then perhaps this would be more to your tastes, General? This liquor has recently gone into production in the capital. While it is rather plain in taste, it is extremely strong. General Pujol is rather fond of it, in fact.” As he spoke, Zenjirou offered a silver chalice with the distilled spirits in it to the general.

“Oh my, my. If it comes with your recommendation, I would be happy to partake,” General Martin replied, pausing to take a sip. “Hmm, it is indeed strong enough to burn the back of your throat, but I feel it is a touch too lacking in flavor for me.”

“I should have known. Such opinions are common even among my countrymen. We will need to improve it and add more depth to the flavor.”

“That sounds intriguing. I would gladly sample it once it is perfected.”

“And I would gladly have you spread it around the country. I would be rather grateful if it could one day become one of our national specialties.”

The younger knight had regained his composure during the conversation and

now looked quizzically at Zenjirou.

“You seem to be thinking similarly to a merchant, Your Majesty. Do you perhaps hail from such a family?”

The youth’s question prompted a frown on the general’s brow. While it was common knowledge that Zenjirou was not royalty by birth, it was improper to ask if he had come from a family of merchants. However, Zenjirou showed no concern.

“Well, I suppose it would be something along those lines, yes,” he answered without any real displeasure. Zenjirou was originally an office worker for a business, so calling him a merchant wasn’t too far off the mark.

“I do seem to recall word of your success against drakes on the battlefield,” Martin commented to help his subordinate avoid any censure from the foreign royal. It was a topic that could easily lift up Zenjirou, after all. Unfortunately, the prince consort himself took things in a completely different direction.

“Ah, I simply happened to be on the battlefield on that occasion. Warfare is far outside of my specializations. The only contribution I could make was ensuring I was no detriment. That in itself was stressful enough, so I will pass on doing so again.”

“Hm...I see.”

Martin couldn’t hide the confusion from his face or voice. The knight next to him also couldn’t hide his scorn and contempt. That much, at least, wasn’t something he would be blamed for. That was how peculiar Zenjirou’s effective comment of “I can’t fight; I’ve had enough of that” was from this world’s perspective. Relatively young noblemen usually had some level of combat ability, and those who didn’t were ashamed of being in that minority. From that viewpoint, it seemed like Zenjirou was bluffing.

“Your Majesty, have you not received training in general?” Chris asked, his gaze on Zenjirou’s hands as he spoke.

Zenjirou smiled ruefully and opened up his right hand to display it.

“Precisely. Training now would be close to fruitless, so I have resigned myself.”

Underscoring his words was the fact that the palms of his hands were as smooth as a woman's or child's of this world, with no calluses. If he had been in the baseball or kendo clubs, it might have caused some doubt on that front, but he had been part of the soccer club and not led a life where he'd gained calluses.

"I would wager even a smattering of training would have some worth. Perhaps you should discard your prior bias and try it?"

While the statement sounded like it was born of concern, the look on his face and the tone it was spoken with were tainted with an indelible tint of disdain for Zenjirou. He was far from dense enough to miss that, but he also knew that calling it out would lead to more annoyance, so instead, he feigned ignorance of the knight's displeasure after a moment of thought and chuckled.

"Indeed. I might consider it should I have the chance."

"I am glad you will give it some thought."

Next to the younger knight, the general cast his eyes away in a show of thanks for Zenjirou's tolerance.

It was customary that after the debut was over, the newlyweds would return to the hall for the later part of the buffet. Unlike the actual ceremony, the buffet was less formal and allowed the couple to interact directly with the guests. For those who viewed weddings as chances to make diplomatic overtures, this was almost the main event. As a large part of the function was to offer your congratulations to the new couple, a certain amount of speaking above your station was permitted. However, despite the fact that the newlyweds had just entered, no one hurried over to the groom.

The hall had fallen into sudden silence as everyone watched with bated breath. Pujol's mouth had twisted into a smile, and he was looking at Martin, who had a similar expression on his face. The extras lining the hall could only wait as the two heroes from the great war met each other once more.

"It has been a while, General Martin. I am glad you look to be in good health," Pujol said as he strode calmly over to the other man, running a finger over the scar on his left eyebrow as he did, although whether it was an intentional or unconscious act, no one could tell.

“Of course I have, General Pujol. After all, I have had no encounters with you. I would have no other reason to be in ill health, would I?” As he answered, the foreign general very clearly put a hand on his wide chest. Underneath his formal wear was a scar—thin in comparison to his bulky frame, but a long slice across his chest that had been given to him by Pujol.

Of course, both of the generals had fought through the war and had long military records, so both had countless scars across their bodies. However, the majority were from arrows and stones, ranged weaponry. There were a few scars each of them carried from close combat, but the only scar General Pujol had from a face-to-face encounter was the one he had touched, while the same went for General Martin’s chest.

Heroes and champions were always side by side with death on the battlefield. In that respect, there was nothing special about either man. However, considering that, even with perfect preparation, completely honing their bodies, and without any real bad luck, the person in front of them could each bring the other down, they were both special.

The two locked eyes. General Pujol was just under 2 meters tall and weighed in at over a hundred kilos, while General Martin was just under 1.8 meters tall and of similar weight.

While he was about twenty centimeters shorter, the foreign general was most definitely broader. It was like a saber-tooth staring down a grizzly, and the tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“It would seem you have kept up your training, General Pujol. Finding the time while fulfilling a general’s role is not easy. You have my admiration.”

“Indeed, I feel like I may have even grown slightly stronger. It does my own heart good to see that you seem to have done likewise, General Martin.”

“I worked my way up, after all. My strength is directly linked to my leadership, so I cannot shy away from my training. Even so, at my age, maintenance is the most I can do.”

“Oh, if that is the case then perhaps we will finally stand equal, you and I.”

“Hmph, forget the modesty. You already stood equal with me. You would

clearly be stronger now. That does not mean that if we were to stand against each other, you would be sure of a win, however.”

“Oh...”

“Hmm...”

The usually concise men’s smiles deepened as they spoke. The air between them also grew more aggressive as those smiles grew. Would they break out into a fight right then and here? The conversation had begun with a joking tone, but neither of them seemed inclined to back down.

The worries the spectators held were dispersed by none other than the woman at the groom’s side—the bride.

“Sir Pujol, I understand enjoying a reunion with an old friend, but would venture to say that perhaps you shouldn’t leave your wife aside for so long on such an auspicious day. Could I trouble you for an introduction?” asked Lucinda Gaziel—or rather, Lucinda Guillén now—with a smile as she gave a slight tug on her new husband’s sleeve.

Her expression was soft, and there was no fear or tension in her face or bearing. While it might have taken the form of a wife sulking over her husband not paying enough attention to her, the truth couldn’t have been more different. If anything, she actually had the most accurate view of the situation and had decided it would be dangerous to allow it to continue. She had therefore feigned ignorance of the situation to bring it back under control.

Of course, the “danger” in question was not the two of them fighting. That was rather unlikely, after all. Her concern was more that if neither of them gave any ground and continued to be belligerent with each other, it could be taken as both of them wanting a resumption of conflict and needlessly heighten both countries’ wariness towards each other.

“While I understand that you gentlemen are joking, such jokes are ill-suited to be heard by a woman’s ears. Sir Pujol, if you would involve me as well?” she added, stressing the word “joking” as she looked up at her husband.

“Hmm,” the general muttered after a moment, “you are quite right. My apologies. Removed from a female’s mindset as we military men may be, it

would appear we went too far. Forgive me, Lucinda. General Martin, allow me to introduce you to my wife from this day forth, Lucinda.”

“It is an honor to meet you, General Martin. I was the first child of the Gaziel family and from this day forth I have pledged myself as Pujol Guillén’s wife. I have heard much of your exploits and am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you.” She spoke with a gentle voice and a calm tone, a reserved smile on her lips.

The foreign general’s stance shifted at her smile as well. It was nothing overbearing, simply a wife’s smile as she guided the situation back on track.

“You make a beautiful bride. I am General Martin Nadal of the Kingdom of Nabara. Lord Pujol, it would appear that fortune does not only favor you on the battlefield if it has brought you such a wonderful wife.”

“Indeed. I feel all the more vindicated for having remained single until now,” Pujol answered.

“You both honor me too much,” Lucinda answered as the tension between the two generals finally eased and allowed conversation to break out again once more in the hall.

Intermission 1 — The Queen in the Capital

Regardless of how things were before, Zenjirou had taken up a reasonable amount of work under his appellation as royalty.

Now that he was away from the capital, things that would ordinarily be done by him would be left undone. He would only be away for a month, so some of those things could be left for his return, but there were still matters that needed to be attended to, and they required representatives, particularly the entertainment of their guests from Sharou-Gilbelle. Now that Zenjirou was not here, Aura had no choice but to take on that duty herself.

“It has been too long, Your Majesty. Is Prince Carlos in good health?” Francesco asked the red-headed queen across from him as he lounged on the sofa as if it were his own.

She smiled calmly in response to the blond’s question and nodded. “Indeed, there are no problems now, thanks to your assistance. It would seem that I owe you, and us meeting like this is causing issues for Princess Bona as well,” she replied placidly.

“If you think so, then soothe her somewhat.”

“I shall.”

Bona acted as Francesco’s supervisor, and it was therefore impossible for him to attend official events without her present. To work around that, Aura had requested something quite particular from Bona in exchange for her stay.

The item in question was a decorative outdoor candlestick. As the name implied, it was nothing more than a fancy source of illumination, but the issue was that it required three spells to be incorporated into it: a flame spell to act as a source of illumination, a wind barrier to keep the flame steady while outside, and water manipulation to reflect the light into something more fantastic.

Individually, they were all practically cantrips that would take a small amount

of time to create magic items from. But the problem of having three spells for only one piece of marble to use remained.

The flame enchantment could be completed in a day if she used the marble as a medium, it being the main part of the device, but the other two would have to be enchanted normally. This meant that however hard she tried, it would take at least a month per enchantment. Taking into account the effort spent on the construction and decoration of the base item, it would take around three to four months total. Therefore, Bona's hands were effectively tied for the time being.

Still, even the most devoted people didn't sit and work around the clock, although it wasn't something she could put aside for more than half a day.

During that time, Francesco had periods of freedom.

"Thinking about it, His Majesty should be at the wedding rather soon, no? That *was* a surprise. That a princess from the Northern Continent was accepted as his partner, that is," the prince said before adding with a laugh, "A bold a decision as ever, Your Majesty."

Her smile didn't waver as she answered. "Romance is a matter of the couple's hearts. Even royals and nobles cannot truly bind our emotions."

"I see, I see. You are as openhearted as I have come to expect." Francesco nodded exaggeratedly with a laugh as Aura insisted that the partnership was one born of romance.

The queen's smile took on a slightly menacing air, but the prince's reactions remained as inscrutable as they always were. "And what of yourself? I am certain that you are aware of the meaning behind taking a woman besides your wife to a wedding. We have an agreement with the Sharou family regarding concubines for my husband. Do you not feel the need to comment?"

"Aha ha, oh, Your Majesty. No one expects that agreement to be upheld."

The statement was so frank that it invited concerns of ulterior motives, even if it was true on the whole. The agreement didn't place any restriction on having concubines; rather, it applied in the case of children.

"Which means that I can assume Princess Bona is here as a piece on the board

for just such a thing?”

Aura was willing to ask such a provocative question because Freya had drastically changed the situation. Nobles had resumed making their offers, practically saying, “If he’s taking one, then what’s another?”

If Zenjirou was getting more concubines, it became necessary to sound out the Sharou family with regards to their agreement. Of course, it was close to impossible to have a discussion go well enough to sound Francesco out.

“I suppose so. Well, the Sharou family would not impose any restrictions on the two of them forming an intimate relationship. I’d guess the main thrust will come during his visit, though.”

Faced with the prince so easily exposing his country’s motives, even Aura had to remain silent for a moment. It was all too logical to just assume it was a falsehood, but taking his words as gospel had its own risks. Overall, she had to remain wary.

“Oh, then the Sharou family will be welcoming him to the capital?”

“Indeed, everyone under the king himself is ready and waiting to welcome him.”

“That...sounds more like lying in wait rather than waiting to welcome.”

“I should have expected no less from your sharp insight.” The blond chuckled, effectively agreeing.

Aura didn’t hide a frown at that, her forehead creasing. *It feels like I have some sort of specter as my challenger.*

Despite the queen’s clear displeasure, the prince just kept chuckling.

“I shall inform him that he is to return immediately if he feels threatened,” she stated.

“That should be fine. Oh, can I get him to take a letter when he goes? I’d like to keep in touch with my parents and siblings from time to time.”

Francesco had the dual burn parchments, but they were limited and not suitable for private communications. Aura was caught slightly off-guard by that and only replied after a surprised blink.

“Hm? Then you will not be returning home? I was almost sure you would both journey back for my husband’s visit to your country.”

Francesco had come to Capua to check on the lineal magics that Carlos Zenkichi had inherited along with making it clear that the infant may well be able to actually utilize both.

Bona, for her part, could be considered to be something of a honeypot for Zenjirou. Francesco’s mission had already been accomplished, but it would be more efficient for Bona to return to the Twin Kingdoms with Zenjirou.

However, Francesco simply shook his head, apparently completely unconcerned with such calculations. “Ah, well things are much more comfortable here. There are so many people nagging me back there.”

“Princess Bona is here, is she not?”

“But there’s *only* her here. There’s a whole swarm of them back home, not just the one person, all telling me the same things. Still, I’d like to tell them I’m well and how things are here. Is that an issue?”

Aura managed to parse out his true feelings somehow and made a point with her eyes narrowing slightly. “Hmm, then what of a temporary return? He will only be visiting your country once he has learned teleportation magic. In which case, it is but a day’s travel between here and the Twin Kingdom’s palace. The trip there can be accomplished through my casting, while the trip back can be through his. Of course, it would require a suitable remuneration.”

“Ah, I see,” Francesco said, clapping his hands in seemingly surprised realization.

Aura was right. Once Zenjirou learned teleportation magic, once he was in the capital, there was effectively a warp gate, albeit with a limited number of uses, between the two places. With instantaneous, not to mention safe, transport to and from the country, there was no reason for him to choose not to go.

“In that case, I would be quite happy to take you up on your offer. Oh, I’d also prefer to delay it so Bona and I can both return. Would you be willing to accept money as payment?”

While Francesco’s voice turned cheery, Aura kept her cool as she answered. “I

would prefer magic items. We will provide the gems to be utilized, so I would appreciate a single teleportation tool.”

Not even Francesco had expected such a proposal. After a period of shocked silence, he smiled wildly. “That certainly sounds worth doing. However, it has a little too high value for four uses of teleportation. Perhaps we could pay for transport with coin and create two of those tools, taking the second as payment for doing so?”

Teleportation was magic that formed the foundation of the Capuan royal family’s power, and they had a long history of having to refuse the Twin Kingdoms’ requests for such items.

Francesco’s wide smile and leaning forward was due to Aura breaking that tradition. However, the queen shook her head with a severe expression. “No, only the one. I would also prefer that it be single-use. If it cannot be done that way, then I shall not force it. In that case, you may pay your way with coin, yes.”

She perhaps expected some kind of bargaining attempt, given her tone was utterly unforgiving.

“Hmm, I suppose so. Mrrmmmm, ah, I really would like one, though. Guess I can’t, hmmm...” Francesco folded his arms and frowned, having a brief back and forth with himself. He finally seemed to come to a conclusion and slapped his leg. “Very well. I will give up on teleportation for myself. In exchange, I want those gems. You must have a fair amount left, no? How about three, including the one for your own item?”

“That is reaching too far. Two would be doable, but you must first inform me of the kind of tool you will be creating. Depending on that, it may not be possible to grant your request.”

Her answer was, really, to be expected. Francesco was staying in the royal palace, so she needed to ensure he didn’t create anything dangerous. It seemed like Francesco didn’t quite see it the same way, however, and he glared at the ceiling for a while.

“What I’ll be creating? Hmm, do I really have to tell you?”

“You do.”

“I do.”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm...”

His inner conflict continued for a brief period before he finally seemed to make up his mind and looked back at her with a firm expression. “Very well. I will put my trust in you. It must be kept secret from others, even other royals.”

“So you mean for me to hide it from Zenjiro.” She nodded, checking for confirmation, but he shook his head sharply.

“No, not just His Majesty, I mean *any* other royals.”

“What other royals?” Aura asked, but a brief moment of thought soon revealed to her what he meant.

The only *other* royal of the Capuan royal family—excluding herself and Zenjiro—was the infant Carlos Zenkichi. It seemed highly unlikely that he would be warning her against telling a child that couldn’t even speak. Even so, he wouldn’t feel the need to remind her that she shouldn’t discuss it with royals from countries besides their own. Therefore, there was only one possibility that remained. To not speak of it even to the royals of the Twin Kingdoms, despite their involvement.

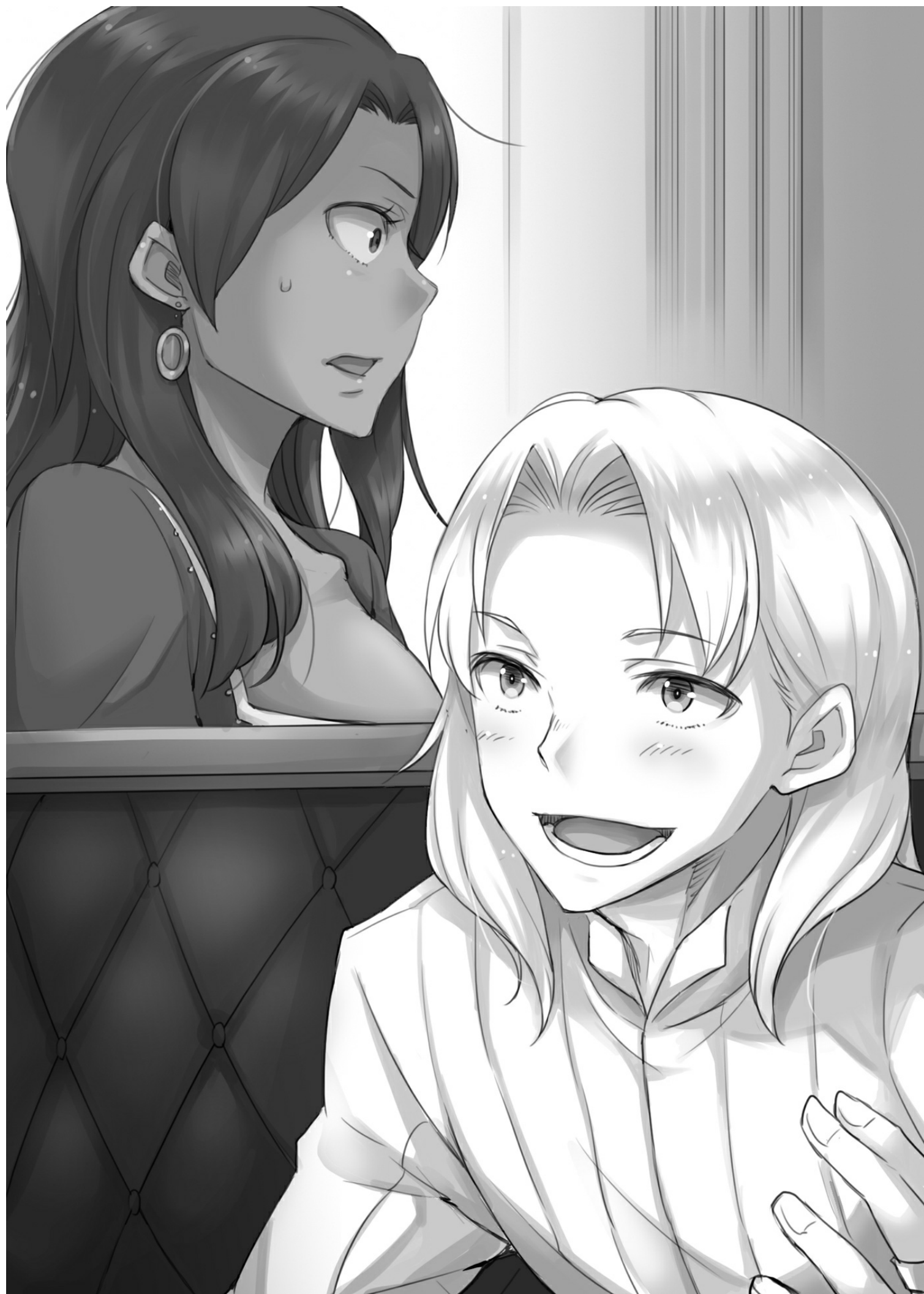
“You mean to keep it hidden from Princess Bona?” Aura asked obliquely, her eyes narrowed sharply.

“Not just Bona,” he answered, a meaningful smile springing to his lips. “My father and grandfather must not hear of it either. Actually, the two of them *particularly* must not hear of it. I tried it once at home and really got it in the neck,” he explained with a rueful laugh.

Aura felt slightly discomfited by his reaction. Having come so far, though, there was no way she couldn’t see it through.

“Very well. It will remain entirely between us. I will not tell another soul. So tell me, Prince Francesco, what will you create?”

“Very well. It will be...a magic tool...for enchantment magic,” he answered, an irrepressible spark of curiosity in his eyes.





Once Francesco had left, Aura sank back into the sofa with a sigh.

“That damned problem prince. He leaks like a sieve...”

A magic tool for *enchanting*. Such a device held the potential to completely upturn this world. He was so inscrutable that she almost thought she shouldn’t allow it.

“I want that teleportation magic tool, though. Without such a thing, I cannot justify sending Zenjirou abroad. While it may be relatively safe to send him to the Twin Kingdoms, Uppasala is out of the question.”

It was part of Aura’s plan. Once things with the Twin Kingdoms were more or less finished, Freya would be returning home to get permission to marry. Aura’s idea was to have Zenjirou accompany her on *Glasisir’s Leaf*.

The greatest advantage of teleportation was that once you had been to a place once, you could then return there at will. That was why the royal family had worked together during the great war to expand the range covered by their teleportation magic across the friendly and neutral countries. With the possible trade deal and official recognition of Freya as Zenjirou’s concubine, there would be no detriment to being able to send people between the two countries.

The issue was that the intercontinental trip by sea was by no means a safe one. He was her beloved husband, but before that, he was the prince consort and the only grown male royal. However much there was to gain by adding the Northern Continent to the list of possible destinations they had, it was not worth risking his life. Unless she could guarantee his safety, she could not send him to the Northern Continent.

A teleportation tool would serve to guarantee his safety. Teleportation was difficult to use for emergencies. While the same was true of all spells, it was impossible to activate this particular one without a clear mental image, and doing so while in danger was beyond the skills of all but a select few with immense courage.

“And Zenjirou probably lacks that courage,” she mused.

While Aura loved the man from the bottom of her heart, her judgment was not so clouded that she would overestimate his abilities. His courage and willpower were such that standing next to someone with a drawn sword would bring the probability of him successfully casting anything to zero. In essence, then, teleportation was useless for emergency escapes. That was precisely why she wanted the tool.

Depending on the exact conditions of the tool, it could be used even while a person was stressed or afraid, as long as they could keep a bare minimum of logic and decisiveness. For example, if the ship was wrecked, the tool could be used in the event that a rescue was impossible or if he was embroiled in some form of combat after disembarkation. Also, if Uppasala tried to detain him, then he could escape on his own.

“I want that tool, but the question is how much to allow. A tool for enchantment itself is as secret as is possible. Considering Francesco’s behavior, it is likely his own initiative. Truly, there is no doubt in his reputation as a genius enchanter.”

At the same time, there was also no doubt that he was a thoughtless fool in every other respect.

“Our country, The Twin Kingdoms, and Uppasala. Who will owe what, and how much will they reap? This will require careful thought.”

Aura was a stateswoman who kept a general balance between internal and external diplomacy. Of course, she prioritized her own country’s benefits, but constantly seeing short-term gains as the most important thing would sour relationships. Conversely, allowing your co-negotiators too much would lead to them potentially growing more impudent.

The dull sound of a knock interrupted her deliberations.

“Enter,” she said after the slightest of pauses.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty.”

The knock itself had led Aura to presume it would be Fabio, and indeed, the long-faced secretary walked in.

“Your Majesty,” he said after entering, “a dwarf wyvern has arrived from Sir

Zenjirou, hailing from the Gaziel march. Here.”

His face was its usual emotionless mask as he placed the three wooden tubes in front of her. Aura took one of them and removed a small sheet of drake parchment from it before casting her eyes over it.

“Hmm...hmm? Nilda Gaziel? Fabio, do you know of a Nilda Gaziel?”

The loyal secretary answered immediately. “No one that I can recall. Who is she?”

“According to my husband’s report, the second daughter of the Gaziel family. She appears to have only come of age this year, being fifteen years old. She is an illegitimate child born from the margrave and a citizen of his lands.”

“The name is not familiar to me,” Fabio answered eventually, his gaze having drifted up to the ceiling in consideration as she spoke. “There are four children of the Gaziel family that I know of. The eldest and second sons both passed away during the war, so those that remain are the third son, Lord Xavier, and the eldest daughter, Lady Lucinda.”

“You are certain?”

“I am. There is no such name on the register, at least.”

“I see. While I do not doubt your recall, especially now, we should check the register to be certain.”

“I quite agree.”

The register in question held the details of the domestic nobles that the royal family managed. Therefore, this Nilda Gaziel, despite claiming to be the margrave’s daughter, was not *officially* a noble.

“This Nilda has apparently been entrusted with entertaining Zenjirou. Having a non-noble—his own child or not—responsible for a royal is unthinkable. I would normally expect some type of plot, but...”

Fabio picked up from where she left off, his own voice crisp. “That itself is unthinkable. I would wager that any such plot is not headed by the margrave himself. The extent of any plots of his would be a pitfall at best.”

The queen gave a slightly reluctant smile as she agreed. “That is somewhat

disrespectful, Fabio, though I agree. It is difficult to imagine the man setting up a bothersome scheme. Which means we would be best served by simply inquiring. Fabio.”

“Yes?”

“Send a messenger to the Gaziel household here in the capital. The majority have returned to the march for the wedding, but there should be someone caring for the estate. Summon the person left in charge. They may know something.”

“Understood, Your Majesty. I shall make the arrangements at once,” the secretary answered with an almost inhumanly perfect bow of his head.

Chapter 3 — A Trifling Spark

A wedding of the leading aristocrats in the area didn't end simply because the ceremony itself finished. After all, people from other regions, the capital, and even abroad had gathered for the celebration.

The transport and accommodation infrastructure of this world wasn't set up to deal with telling so many guests "that's it" and having the groups head off with the seven winds. This was an opportunity for networking, and some people welcomed long stays.

Above all, though, the bride and groom were waiting before their triumphant return to the capital. None of the other attendees would return before that, not even Zenjiro as the prince consort. Therefore, the march was still host to all of the nobles who had attended the wedding.

Zenjiro was generally well-mannered, so he had barely left the area he had been assigned over the days. It wasn't easy being completely cut off from his electronics, but he'd already experienced that during his prior trip to Valentia.

His regrets from last time had led to him bringing a portable music player and two handheld consoles with him. Their batteries were still full. It meant that he hadn't had too much time on his hands at night as yet. Unfortunately, he could only recharge them in the inner palace, so he'd limited himself to a single hour on a single device each night, so there was still a significant amount of time where he had nothing to do.

Of particular importance was his music player. It held a recording of the incantation for teleportation. His current assignment was to practice the pronunciation through repeated listening.

"Lu mavalwahaia hastaobragopena. No go, huh?"

The room was lit by a windup flashlight and the music player's backlight, and Zenjiro let out a long sigh in the gloom.

"Argh...I already knew, but it's so damn difficult! Just pronouncing it is hard

enough,” he complained loudly as he put the player on the desk and stretched in the simple chair.

As he had said, the pronunciation itself was difficult to begin with. He’d made the odd attempt during the journey, but he’d yet to succeed even once. His current understanding of the magic was barely any better than the average joe off the streets.

“Can someone like me even learn a spell so incredible?” he complained idly as he turned the player off before picking up the small silver bell on the desk and ringing it.

The reaction was almost instant.

“What can I do for you?” asked the maid-uniform-clad woman who had been waiting in the next room—Ines.

The flashlight’s illumination was very directional, so other than the area around the desk Zenjirou was using, the room was shrouded in darkness, but none of that difficulty showed in her gait as she approached.

With the lack of progress in lighting in this world, the people inhabiting it had relatively strong night vision compared to his own. While Zenjirou wouldn’t hesitate to flick on a light at this brightness level, it seemed that Ines saw it as bright enough to not cause any impediment. In fact, carrying an oil lamp was dangerous, so as long as the path was clear, it was the norm to go without any illumination in this world. Zenjirou was perhaps an exception among exceptions.

Once the maid’s smooth steps had reached his side, Zenjirou spoke to her.

“What’s Princess Freya up to?” he asked easily.

It was a bearing that he could only take because there was no one present but his trusted maid from the inner palace. Ines was used to it as well, so she answered without her expression changing.

“Her Highness is currently with Lady Nilda, going to the main building.”

“Oh. I heard they were getting on well, but I didn’t know it was *that* well. That’s a bit of a surprise.”

“They are not so far apart in age, and Lady Nilda is a very carefree person. Her Highness seems kindly disposed towards her as well.”

Nilda had been brought up in an agricultural village until recently, so Freya’s exploits—despite her gender—were a subject of considerable respect to her. To have a younger girl look up to her like that was a new experience to the princess, as well as something that tickled her pride.

“That’s good. Having someone you get along with makes boredom much less of an issue.”

“Sir Zenjirou, you appear to have opened up to her significantly as well.”

“A little, at least,” he admitted, deflecting from his embarrassment at her slight smile with a rueful one of his own.

Zenjirou was aware that he struggled to deal with Freya when she made her approaches, but Nilda’s carefree smile was contagious, and watching it spread to Freya was charming.

He stood up from the chair and picked the flashlight up from the desk, addressing the woman before him as he shone it at his feet.

“Perhaps I should go to fetch her, then. Dinner will not be long. Ines, would you lead the way?”

“Very well. Are you certain? I could go alone to summon her.”

“That won’t work. I don’t want rumors spreading that we aren’t getting along.”

Having brought her as his partner, people would see her becoming his concubine as just a matter of time. If they were seen as on poor terms, it would raise doubts about the country’s future prospects.

“Besides,” he added, “it’ll be a nice change of pace.”

Zenjirou was perceptive, so despite knowing that he was contributing to an outcome he was against, he still followed through.



Meanwhile, Freya and Nilda were walking through a darkened corridor of the

main building. Skaji was there as an escort, trailing behind the two of them by three steps.

“Watch your step, Your Highness. Are you okay?”

“Thank you, Nilda, I am. I have rather good night vision and am used to moving around at night.”

In accordance with her answer, there weren't any issues with her pace. A modern man like Zenjirou might see the stone passage as being rather dark, but Freya and Skaji's night vision was well-developed, and Nilda lived here. As long as she could vaguely see where she was, she could rely on her intuition.

“That's incredible, Princess Freya. You can train your night vision, then?”

“It would be better to describe it as naturally acquired rather than consciously trained, I suppose. During hunts, rowing downstream, and even sailing on the open water, everyone has tasks throughout the day, and there are inevitably those which need to be done at night. Your night vision simply develops to fulfill that need.”

While she spoke easily about it, what she was describing were not particularly girlish acts. At the very least, they weren't the actions of a princess. In fact, there was a rueful smile on Skaji's face behind her. As her guard, Skaji was well aware of the princess's more tomboyish nature.

“Princess, we will be turning in a moment,” she stated.

“Thank you, Skaji. I will be fine; I can see,” the silver-haired royal answered her trusted bodyguard, still facing away from her as she took the corner the other woman had mentioned.

Nilda followed suit at her side. Skaji was the first to notice their company, being the one with the best night vision and also paying the most attention to their surroundings.

“Oh? Someone appears to be ahead. I can see a figure.”

Freya—and Nilda at her side—stopped at that and strained their eyes.

“Oh, you are right. Considering where they came from, they are likely one of our soldiers,” Nilda said. However, she had the worst night vision of the three,

and Freya looked doubtful.

“Are you certain? I cannot see clearly from this distance, but that outfit looks more like that of the Kingdom of Nabara’s.”

There was a delegation from the kingdom for the wedding, so Freya was familiar with it to a certain extent, which meant that even the silhouette was enough to tell her the uniform was from the country in question.

“What?” Nilda asked in shock at that before trotting off towards the figure with a quick word of apology to the other two women. Then, she called out to the man, “Excuse me, could I have a moment?”

He flinched and then stopped. While the surroundings were dim, the man’s figure made his gender clear.

“How can I help you?” he asked, the voice telling them that he was quite young. The voice and figure combined allowed Nilda to know that this was not one of her family’s men.

“I am the second daughter of the Gaziel family, Nilda. May I ask your name?”

“Of course,” the man answered after a moment. “I am Knight Raymundo of the Nabaran delegation.”

The man’s voice in the darkness was smooth, but with a hint of tension to it.

“Then I will call you Sir Raymundo. Sir Raymundo, my apologies, but did you just leave from that center passageway?”

The candid question was a rather poor move.

“I did not,” he answered after another pause. “Perhaps you were mistaken; I came from the next passage over.” As he spoke, the man pointed to the opposite passage that Nilda herself had come from...the outer passage when looked at from the building’s perspective.

The corridors were slightly complex. The one the three of them had come from, the one the knight had come from, and the one the knight had indicated ran parallel to each other, but the left and right passages had ninety-degree turns, forming something like a small crossroads with the middle passage going straight through.

However dark it was, though, such subterfuge was pointless. Nilda had most certainly seen him come from the central one and had called him to a stop in the middle. She smiled uncomfortably and pressed the question lightly.

“I am quite certain of what I saw, sir.”

Regardless, the knight didn’t change his attitude. “Mistakes in this level of darkness are rather unavoidable. If you will excuse me, Lady Nilda,” he said, turning and leaving swiftly.

“Ah!” she cried out, reaching for him, but her hand closed on nothing but air.

“What do I do?” she asked herself, bewildered. “I suppose I will have to report this to father.”

Freya and Skaji—who had been watching from a short distance away—walked over.

“Are things well, Nilda? It appears he intruded somewhere without authorization,” Freya commented.

The culture here was foreign to her, and her only position here was as a partner of Zenjirou, the prince consort. With the lack of knowledge and the similar lack of a stable position, she had only watched the events unfold, but she could tell things hadn’t gone well.

Nilda’s smile remained strained as she nodded. “Yes, the central passage connects to a military installation of the estate. Although with that said, it is simply a small, almost disused watchtower. However, it could not be allowed to pass without comment if another country or fiefdom intruded upon it.”

Even noble estates had forbidden areas, state guests or not. Those could include private areas, treasuries that were essentially the fiefdoms’ wallets, and also military installations for its protection. Nilda was right in that the end of the corridor the knight had just left was not a particularly important place. It was, in fact, a place that an interested guest could request to see and easily be allowed into.

However, overlooking unauthorized entry was a completely separate matter. Doing so would also gradually allow entry into other forbidden areas.

“I will need to warn father and brother tomorrow,” she said with a slight sigh. She had no official position, and despite her blood relation, her illegitimacy would lead to her being looked down upon.

“I would be willing to accompany you if you wish,” Freya suggested.

“I would appreciate that, despite the hassle it will cause.”

As the two of them spoke, a strong light came from behind Nilda.

“Princess, Lady Nilda, please step back just in case.”

“Oh, so it is that time already,” Freya commented.

“Oh, Sir Zenjirou.”

Despite the lack of concern in their voices, Freya and Nilda both did as Skaji asked and moved behind her.

The white light was hundreds or thousands of times stronger than moonlight, and Zenjirou was the only one who had such an item here. Therefore, Skaji’s warning was more for formality’s sake, and actual wariness was unnecessary.

“Ah, there you are. Princess Freya, Lady Nilda, we should return to the annex soon; the preparations for dinner are in order.”

As they had expected, the corridor to the annex was currently home to Zenjirou along with his guard and maid, Natalio and Ines, respectively.

“Oh, Your Majesty. My apologies for the trouble.”

“Thank you, Sir Zenjirou.”

The two of them smiled simultaneously at him in the bright white light.

The trio’s relationship had progressed enough that such conversations were commonplace. In a way, the small number of people was almost a benefit. The few people around meant that the number of conversational partners was limited. With the smaller population in remote regions, the three of them had found themselves becoming fairly friendly with each other.

“It needs no thanks. The walk was a good change of pace. An excessive delay would be rude to the chefs, though.”

“You’re right, let’s return,” Freya answered.

“Let’s, Sir Zenjirou.”

The three of them chatted idly as they returned together to the annex.



Nilda had argued against the unauthorized entry of a Nabaran knight into an area denied to him. In itself, it was not a truly large issue. At least, as far as the Gaziels were concerned, if the man had apologized and simply said, “I lost my way,” they would have laughed it off and told him to be more careful next time.

The aggravating factor making it into a much bigger issue was the party involved believing he could pretend it had never happened, and his superior fully supporting him.

“So, Lord Christiano, you refuse to admit it?” The harsh question came from the third son of the Gaziel family, the next lord, Xavier Gaziel.

The leader of the Nabaran knights, Christiano Pinto—possibly in a show of his lack of concern—kept a purposeful smile on his face.

It was the day after the events in question, and Xavier had heard about the situation from Nilda before immediately heading to question the foreign delegation.

“Indeed. It is true that my subordinate, Sir Raymundo, was stopped by Lady Nilda last night. However, as he told her at the time, he had not come from the central passageway, but the outside one.”

“So you insist that Nilda was mistaken?”

Despite the blatant sharpness in Xavier’s tone, the knight’s smile remained as he answered. “Well, after all, the sun had set. It is hardly surprising that a woman would be mistaken, isn’t it? They are often scared of what lies within the darkness.”

“Nilda was not the only person there. Both Princess Freya and her guard are in agreement.”

“They are women as well. Once one person makes a claim, it is far from unusual for the rest of a group to make the same mistake.” His expression was full of confidence. As far as his face showed, he truly believed his words.

The two men stared intensely at each other for a while, wordless. While Chris was slender, he was around 180 centimeters tall, so he was by no means small. Xavier was under 170 centimeters and slight in build, so even with them both being seated, there was a clear difference in height. The foreign knight was also slightly older as well, so the impression of Xavier challenging him and the older man dealing handily with it was impossible to avoid. Xavier could tell from the other man's behavior that he was a stronger warrior as well, so he couldn't take the lead in these negotiations. He took a deep breath, perhaps intending to change tack as he looked harder at their visitor.

"Very well. It appears we have reached an impasse."

"An impasse rather than a conclusion?" The knight smiled thinly.

Xavier gritted his teeth before answering. "I find it immensely difficult to believe that all three witnesses were mistaken."

"In which case, Lord Xavier, do you wish to say that our country's knight is lying?"

There was a long pause.

"Precisely."

A strangled gasp made its way past the other man's lips as he showed the first slip in his composure that day. "Lord Xavier, are you aware of exactly what you are saying?" he asked, his tone lowering.

Xavier focused on keeping his own voice steady. "I am aware that if that is indeed not the case, I will be casting an extremely ill-mannered doubt on your knight. I am prepared to offer a full apology in an official capacity should I be proven to be doing so unjustly."

Chris must not have thought that Xavier would oppose him so firmly and directly, and he was lost for words for a period of time. However, objectively, Xavier had no real reason to play things closer to the chest. He was next in line to inherit the border march of a major nation. Christiano Pinto was the heir to a distinguished family and related to the royalty of a middling nation, Nabara. A rough assessment would put the two of them on more or less even footing.

Of course, Capua and Nabara officially recognized each other's sovereignty, so

Xavier was technically of slightly inferior standing, but the difference was not so great that he would need to back down on a direct confrontation like this one.

“Incidentally, Lord Christiano, you mentioned we had reached a conclusion. Can I take that to mean you agree with our own position?”

The knight’s expression remained blank as he paused, but he was unable to entirely hide his displeasure when he shook his head. “No. We do indeed appear to be at an impasse.”



A member of the Nabaran delegation, Knight Raymundo, had trespassed. Witnesses to it were Nilda Gaziel, Freya Uppasala, and Victoria Kronkvist. Freya was Zenjirou’s partner; Victoria, who went by the name of the famous female warrior, Skaji, was her bodyguard; and Nilda was the host entertaining them for their stay.

All three of them had close relationships with Zenjirou. Therefore, it was practically inevitable that he would become involved in the situation.

“I apologize, Sir Zenjirou. In fact, I cannot offer an apology great enough for involving Princess Freya with an issue of my family.” Nilda bowed in the early morning sunlight streaming through the window. Her expression was as apologetic as her words and Zenjirou worked to keep a gentle smile on his face.

“From what I have heard, you did nothing wrong. The same is true for Princess Freya. The whole thing is simply a matter of bad luck. Regardless of anything else, since the Nabaran delegation is involved, this is not simply a domestic matter; it is an international problem. That means that as I am here as Her Majesty’s representative, I am not uninvolved myself. I will offer all the assistance I can.”

“Thank you, Sir Zenjirou,” Nilda said, her expression changing completely to a bright smile. She was so expressive that it made him worry if she would be suitable as a noble.

“Princess Freya, this is the situation we are in at present, so can I ask you to cooperate with Lady Nilda for a while? If there are any issues, you can use my name.”

Freya smiled in response. “Leave it to me, Your Majesty. Lady Nilda is a friend of mine, and I have my own claims as to what happened that evening. Despite my looks, I am rather confident in my night vision.”

She lifted her chin sharply as she spoke, and while her expression looked somewhat joking, there was no hint of amusement in her eyes. She was being scorned simply for being a woman. She had experienced the same treatment many times in her homeland, but that didn’t mean she was accustomed to it and would take it lying down. Contrary to her appearance, Freya was a strong-willed woman, and she was indignant when her abilities were called into question.

“I will be relying on you, Princess Freya.”

“I understand,” Freya answered, her sharp smile still in place as she gave a ladylike bow.

Once the two women had left, Zenjirou slumped back and let his face twist as if he’d bitten into a lemon. “Urgh...this is going to be annoying,” he grumbled.

The only other person currently in the room was his maid, Ines. Her position as a maid did not exactly make her suitable for a discussion of Zenjirou’s problems, but she was the only one there that he could place his faith and confide in.

“Hey, Ines, talk with me a minute. This is just for reference in the end, and any decisions will be my own and my responsibility, so I want your completely honest opinion.”

“Understood, Sir Zenjirou,” the middle-aged maid replied, seemingly having expected the request.

He nodded and then spoke. “Thanks. So, I think a lot of this is common sense, but I want to make sure of everything. As far as this situation goes, if Nilda isn’t a noble, it would become a major incident?”

That was his greatest concern here. There was a strong possibility that Nilda Gaziel was not a noble. The reason for his assumption was the fact that Aura had not mentioned her. Nobles were recorded in the register that she controlled. Conversely, a person who was not recorded on the register—even if

they were directly related to a noble—was not officially a noble themselves. If Aura was not aware of Nilda's existence, there was a strong possibility that this was true for the younger woman.

The maid calmly nodded in agreement. "It would indeed become a much larger issue. This would then be a full diplomatic incident."

Zenjirou sighed at the unfortunate confirmation. "I thought so. Just checking, but I assume it wouldn't matter even if the knight *was* lying and Nilda was completely correct?"

"Indeed. Societal positions would take precedence here, so the actual facts hold no bearing. This is all the more true with the issue being a matter of a knight trespassing at such a late hour. A male soldier, even a commoner, would be in a slightly different position, though."

"So the gender's the issue here. What difference would them being a soldier make, though? Is it out of respect for them serving on the battlefield?"

The maid gave a more thorough explanation. "No, it is because the incident involves a night patrol. Generally, if it falls within their purview, even a commoner's words would be heeded."

So it was like a knight buying a weapon from a smith and complaining that it was subpar. The smith's objections would be fully taken into account due to a smith being more of a weapons specialist than a knight.

However, the issue this time was a nighttime trespass. It could fall under the realm of combat, which would of course be a knight's specialty while being far from the domain of a normal girl. So, per Zenjirou's concerns, if Nilda was not a noble, things would get even more troublesome.

"Argh, this is bad. Considering how she's acting, Nilda might not even realize that she isn't technically a noble. Depending on how things go, I might need to explain it to the margrave and establish some form of cooperation."

"That could be risky," Ines warned him. "While the possibility of some sort of scheme is remote, it is not nonexistent. Even if Lady Nilda's birth remaining unreported was simply a case of negligence rather than plotting, there is also the potential of that negligence being on the royal family's part. With the

situation as it is, explaining all of that so openly to the margrave seems rather dangerous.”

“Ah, you’re right. I get that...but this could be an international incident, couldn’t it? Debts between the royal family and one of their feudal families is internal. Overlooking an international problem simply to avoid harm to the royal family isn’t good either. We have to get our priorities right. Still, the remote possibility of this being some plot on the Gaziel’s part would be the worst possible scenario. While the possibility is low, it’s by no means zero, so we can’t ignore that either...”

There was no end to his worries as Zenjirou stared up at the ceiling. Was Nilda’s name on the register or not? If it was not, was it due to some scheme or a simple procedural error?

Of course, if her name *was* on the register, then there was no issue at all. The problems would arise only if her name was not present.

If this was some sort of plot on the part of the Gaziel family, then discussing it with them could precipitate the worst possible outcome. However, if her absence was a simple procedural error, it would be best to report it to the margrave as soon as possible.

I think it’s most likely to be a simple issue, but I can’t just assume that without making things worse.

If Zenjirou put a foot out of place, he could be stepping off a cliff. However low the possibility was, his personality meant that he couldn’t actively walk to his doom like that.

“Seriously, how unlucky is Nilda. Maybe it’s just poor timing...” he sighed.

Ines shook her head. “Sir Zenjirou, that isn’t the case at all. It is a matter of her handling.”

“Wha?”

“Even a woman of noble birth would normally allow the gentleman’s difference in statement stand, and then make her intentions clear without words as she took steps to address it.”

In other words, taking this situation as an example, when the knight had said that she was mistaken, Nilda ought to have apologized with something like, “I see; excuse me, then.” Afterwards, she could have added a warning along the lines of, “However, it is your presence in such a misleading location that would cause a woman like me to be mistaken. I would greatly appreciate it if you could avoid actions that could cause me to make such *mistakes*.”

The knight could then have replied, “I see. I certainly share some of the responsibility for being in such a location. I shall take greater care in the future. My thanks for your kind concern.”

Everything would have been settled peacefully then. Effectively, she would have officially accepted the knight’s claim that she was mistaken while simultaneously giving him a warning that she knew it wasn’t the case and that he needed to watch himself.

However, Nilda had blown that chance by bluntly protesting and saying, “No, I wasn’t. I saw it. Why are you lying?” That had then prompted the knight to double down in either surprise or obstinacy as he refused to back down from his position.

From that perspective, it could almost be considered a failure on Nilda’s part. Of course, the root of the matter was still the knight trespassing.

“Right, she *did* say she’d been brought up as a normal villager until she was older, so I guess she doesn’t have the training a noble would normally have.”

“Likely so,” Ines agreed. “Being brought up that way would give her a fundamentally different awareness, and replacing that with a noble’s understanding is no easy feat.”

“This is just getting worse and worse, isn’t it?”

If a girl who wasn’t actually a noble had behaved in a way ill-fitting a noble, then even if the Nabaran knight was in the wrong, it would put the Capuan side in a rather weak position.

“Maybe I could ask Princess Freya to take the brunt of things?” Zenjirou mused—albeit reluctantly—after a long period of thought.

“Have her take the brunt?” the maid echoed quizzically.

“Yeah. She was there too, so I thought we could have her take the lead. Things are already blowing up, so I doubt the Gaziels can just back down and admit their mistake now. That said, keeping Nilda at the forefront of it and letting things get aggravated before it comes out that she isn’t a noble will make things even more troublesome. In which case, we can have her step back and take the position that it’s Princess Freya stubbornly sticking to it, and sort things that way.”

“That *would* greatly reduce our current concerns, but are you certain? You are the main person that can guarantee her position here. I believe it will be taken as a statement that the connection between the two of you is even stronger.”

“I figured...” Zenjirou sighed.

On top of that, asking her to take on such a burden would lead to him owing the princess a large debt. She was aiming to become his concubine, so he doubted she’d overlook the opportunity.

Regardless, it was the safest idea he could come up with. Considering his roughly average sense of responsibility and above-average cowardice, he inevitably leaned towards the safest option he could come up with.

“I’ll rely on her for her cooperation,” he decided. “We need to ask her as soon as possible. We also can’t allow Lady Nilda to hear about it, so try to get her to come to me alone.”

“Very well,” Ines replied with a bow.



The initial cause had been a tiny conflict between the Nabaran knight, Sir Raymundo, and the second daughter of the Gaziel family, Nilda. However, neither of their representatives—Christiano Pinto and Xavier Gaziel, respectively—would give any ground, so that tiny spark was swiftly billowing into a roaring flame. If it burned much more fiercely, it could easily lead to unforeseen damages.

A person with some amount of insight would definitely feel like they were in a bad situation. Fortunately, though, both sides’ “commanders in chief,” so to speak—Margrave Miguel Gaziel and General Martin Nadal—possessed such

insight.

“First, allow me to offer my thanks to you, Margrave, for arranging the meeting. We will hopefully be able to finish this without things getting out of control,” the general said.

“Not at all. In fact, I must offer my apologies that my daughter’s behavior has caused this escalation, General Martin. Also, it was not I that arranged this. If you wish to give your thanks, you should direct them to my daughter...the Lady Guillén.”

While their apprentice and son were fanning the flames, the master and father were exchanging smiles.

“I see. I shall do so afterwards,” the general said, nodding several times.

As the conversation implied, the newlywed Lucinda had arranged the meeting. The room the two of them were in was one originally set up to meet the new couple. The general had requested an audience with the new couple, but Lucinda had “carelessly” double-booked her father for the same time. The couple was currently adjusting their schedule, and while that was going on, the two men were asked to wait in the same antechamber. Therefore they decided to use their “chance” meeting to discuss things unofficially and reconcile each other’s positions.

It was utterly barefaced, but such public reasoning was indispensable for noble society. If it had been an official meeting, then each of the pair’s public stances would have interfered, and they would have been unable to discuss things frankly. The two of them instead used this locale to talk much more freely.

After their simple greetings, the margrave moved on to the main topic.

“This started from a trifling disagreement, and I see it as an honestly ridiculous dispute. I would therefore like to solve it with a minimum of escalation.”

“I agree. This would normally be solved with a verbal warning and apology. I would be grateful if we could do precisely that.”

The margrave was significantly older than the general but they conversed on

even terms. In terms of position, there was not a huge difference between them, and the margrave respected the general for his far greater prowess on the battlefield. Likewise, the general respected the margrave's prior service on the battlefield before the younger man had even been born, which led to mutual esteem between the two men.

Of course, they were still the margrave of a border march and a foreign general. They both had some negative feelings towards each other, but they could give each other the courtesy of not showing that outwardly. All of this made things go much more smoothly.

"Honestly, that Xavier. He reminds me of my own youth, and not in a good way. He lacks flexibility and insists on solving things as they appear. In this case, whatever the truth may be, there would have been no issue with treating it publicly as Nilda misinterpreting things."

"It seems even you have your hands full with raising your children," the general commented neutrally. However, he couldn't hide a sardonic grin. The way the margrave had worded his statement made him out to be much more flexible, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. The man was poor enough at circumlocution and subtle communication that it was honestly impressive he could act as a noble in a country such as Capua.

Miguel laughed. "What an unsightly sight we've allowed. Dressing things up in platitudes will do no good here, so let me be blunt. Your knight...Raymundo, I believe? Is there truth to the claims of his trespass?"

The question was extremely direct, even for an unofficial meeting such as this, so Martin's grin deepened on his bearlike visage as he gave a short nod.

"Chris's questioning was rather lax, so we have yet to hear things put plainly by the man himself, but it certainly seems so."

The confession was only possible due to the fact that this *was* an unofficial—or effectively nonexistent—meeting. The margrave didn't show any shock or rage at the admission. He simply nodded and continued dispassionately.

"I thought so. Nilda isn't one to lie about such things, and three witnesses all making the same mistake does somewhat stretch credibility."

“Still, I would have liked to see slightly more consideration from Lady Nilda. Our knight may have started it, but she questioned him rather bluntly. The questioning left no room for him to maneuver, so we are left solely with the options of a complete apology or feigning ignorance,” Martin said, scowling slightly.

“That is more my own fault than that of my daughter. Apologies. I presume you have already realized, but she was not born of my legal wife. She was brought up in the village until she was nine.”

“Oh, she is well put together for all that. Allow me to withdraw my prior remark; you are clearly more than capable of raising a child.”

“You need not bother. Most of her instruction is the fruit of Lucinda’s efforts rather than my own. The fact that they fell short, though, is entirely my own loss,” the man answered with a shake of his head.

The ease with which he said that was due to the margrave’s integrity, but also a detriment as nobility. His phrasing here let information slip to the general. Information that Lucinda was greatly valued by the margrave.

“I see. You must be proud of her,” Martin answered with a smooth nod, revising his wariness of Pujol as he did. “Well, putting the matter of Lady Lucinda aside for now, we should discuss the matter between Lady Nilda and Sir Raymundo. Ordinarily, this would be solved with a verbal apology and warning, but my knight leader and your Lord Xavier are butting heads. It is no longer a problem that can be solved so easily.”

“So this meeting exists to keep the flames as subdued as possible, no?”

“Indeed, indeed,” the general answered with a slightly menacing grin, his voice cajoling. “You and I can come to a mutual understanding here and keep the flames under control. Still, this presents an opportunity. Now, this is purely hypothetical at present, but what would you say to reaching an agreement ourselves but allowing the youths to make their play before stepping in? I believe it represents a valuable chance for Lord Xavier.”

“Hmm...I understand what you wish to say. Still, deceiving my child in such a way does not sit well with me. However, it would indeed be useful. Hmmm...” The margrave frowned unhappily at the suggestion as he pondered it.

The comment itself wasn't difficult to understand. Essentially, it boiled down to "this is a good chance for us both, so let's keep our underlings in check and give them a bit of experience."

It was indeed a valuable opportunity. While the two youths were in complete opposition and crossing metaphorical blades, their superiors were in agreement about letting it become bigger than it needed to. Frankly, it was an extremely attractive proposition. Chris and Xavier got the pressure of taking on the leading roles while their superiors were both there to step in and stop anyone from getting burned.

In other words, it was a golden opportunity to allow the two inexperienced youths to gain experience with international politics in a safe environment.

If the two of them attempted a true negotiation and then became aware that their superiors were protecting them, both of their feelings would doubtless be hurt, but that too was an important lesson.

"How about it, Margrave? Will you not consider it?"

"Hmm..."

The only reason the margrave was still unhappy despite understanding the utility of it was simply that it was against his preferences. He was a military man through and through, so he wouldn't hesitate to deceive an enemy, but he shied away from doing so to allies and relatives.

Naturally, however, he was familiar with telling his men that nonexistent reinforcements were on their way to keep up morale, along with overstating an enemy force's strength to avoid negligence as a *fait accompli*. The man was not so hardheaded that he didn't understand the concept of a means to an end.

After a period of intense thought, he nodded, his scowl still firmly in place. "Aye, very well. I cannot deny the advantages offered by the situation. Are you certain, though? Your knight leader isn't yet aware that your knight's lie caused this, is he? He might end up with the rug pulled from under his feet."

"That itself will be a valuable experience," the general said, brushing aside the margrave's concern.

"If he loses his temper, we will not be able to overlook it."

“I know. I will deal with him in that case. What of the alternative, though? There is a strong possibility that our Chris will manage to push through and have things accepted as a mistake on your part.”

“In that case, regardless of the official stance, I expect you to privately reprimand your knight and his leader. As much as I dislike it, I know full well that an unfair defeat will place him in good stead, so I will keep him in check. Emotional matters are another matter, though. I will be unable to stop either my son or daughter growing disillusioned with you.”

The general offered a nod of agreement at the implicit question of whether he was still willing to go ahead at that. “True. If that should come to pass, I will offer my own unofficial apologies to Lord Xavier and Lady Nilda.”

Naturally, the general wanted to avoid the next lord of this fiefdom having a sense of estrangement from them as a neighboring country. In that respect, it was potentially more beneficial to both sides for this to end in the knight leader’s defeat. If they lost, Chris would get the experience of failing due to a lack of follow-up, along with a lack of friction with Capua. Conversely, if they won, it would harm their relations with the next lord of the march, and all they would gain would be the perpetuation of a knight’s falsehood.

Well, that in and of itself would be beneficial for the knight leader to learn in another way, so it was not quite so cut-and-dry, but it was comparatively better for them to lose. That said, while things seemed almost entirely solved here, Zenjirou would have been ashen-faced and gibbering if he’d been present.

Either Sir Raymundo’s lie would be revealed and Knight Leader Chris would be forced to apologize, or the lie would persist and General Martin would apologize unofficially to Xavier and Nilda. Both were safe results, under the assumption that Nilda was a noble.

If it was later found out that Nilda Gaziel was not officially a noble, then that would cause things to become even more complex. Regardless, without the information being known to demonstrate the lack of foundation, the suggestions were extremely reasonable and realistic.

“Hmm,” the general mused. “This was a productive discussion. I will have to give my thanks to Lady Guillén indeed.”

“True. However the dice fall, we should be able to avoid an inferno.”

Both men had no knowledge of the shifting foundation they were standing upon as they exchanged pleasantries and laughed cheerily.

Intermission 2 — The Queen's Faith

"This Nilda is definitely a member of the Gaziel family?" Aura pressed, causing the plump, middle-aged noble in front of her to nod, sweat running down his face.

"Y-Yes, definitely. I have remained in the capital, so am unsure of the specifics, but our duplicate of the register contains her name. Please inquire at the march itself if you doubt my word," he finished strongly.

"I will be doing so at a later date," she confirmed. "While I am not casting aspersions on the Gaziels, our copy of the register does not feature the name Nilda Gaziel."

"Impossible..." the corpulent man exclaimed, his second chin jiggling in shock.



“Calm yourself, Lord Severo. I repeat, I am not casting aspersions on the Gaziel family. I have heard that she was discovered in the midst of the war, no? The chaos around the war could easily have resulted in miscommunication,” Aura said, soothing the man before her—Severo—while keeping her cool.

Severo was a noble retainer of the Gaziel family. He was from the highest echelons of the fief, as could be seen from the heavy responsibility he bore of managing their residence in the capital. His position was perhaps best explained by comparing him to an Edo karo in the Edo period.

Regardless, the man regained his calm somewhat with the queen’s assurance and offered an answer as he mopped his brow with a handkerchief. “I-Indeed. Pardon me, I lost my composure.”

“It is no surprise. I was shocked by the turn of events myself.”

“That lets me rest a little easier, Your Majesty.”

“I have no intention of upsetting the status quo. However, an omission in the register is no small matter. I intend to solve this as quickly as possible. I may send a messenger from the capital to the march, depending on the situation. Make the necessary preparations for such an eventuality.”

“At once, Your Majesty,” the man answered, practically folding his corpulent frame in half with a bow.

As the door thudded shut, Aura let the casual ease fall from her face and let out a growl. “This has grown much more troublesome.”

“It certainly seems so,” the secretary at her side calmly opined.

She turned a scorching glare his way, as if to vent at him, but quickly regained her cool. “Considering the man’s bearing, it seems this was completely unforeseen on the Gaziels’ part.”

“I believe so. The margrave is far from skilled with such pageantry, and I highly doubt he is unaware of the risks of falsely claiming to have a copy of the register.”

Forging or misrepresenting the register or a copy of it—the document which bestowed nobility—carried the death penalty. With the elevated position the

margrave enjoyed due to the significant trust between his family and the royal family, it would be far too risky to even contemplate.

“Which means this is not due to anyone’s schemes, but a simple miscommunication or error. To say nothing of the fact that if their copy contains her name but ours does not, the mistake rests on us.”

For whatever reason, she was missing from the royal family’s register. That was the only plausible conclusion at present. While Aura was reluctant to admit it, she was also fairly sure of how it had come about.

“The Gaziel family reclaimed Nilda when she was nine. Currently, she is fifteen, so counting backward, it is easy to determine the ‘culprit.’”

“His Majesty Sancho.”

“Indeed, Sancho,” she agreed, an unhappy look on her face.

Sancho I, the king prior to the last one, Aura’s younger brother. He was also known by the appellation The King of Vengeance. He had reigned for a short period, having vowed vengeance for his beloved older brother, Enrique IV. Most of his short reign had been spent on the battlefield. It had ended on the battlefield as well, so he had seen it through. His corpse had been covered in wounds, almost all of them fatal. A spear had pierced deep into his stomach, an arrow lodged in his chest, and he had been slashed to the bone on his neck, so no one knew which had been the final blow.

The period the Gaziels were claiming Nilda had been added to the register was during the man’s reign. The tumult of war meant that it was far from impossible for part of the register to have been lost.

“That would make it entirely our—that is, the royal family’s—fault. We will need to exercise significant care to ensure we do not antagonize them.”

“To say nothing of the possibility that this is not restricted to the Gaziel family. If your assumption holds true, we may well find several more in Lady Nilda’s position.”

Part of the register had been lost along with Sancho’s life on the battlefield. Assuming Nilda Gaziel’s name was the only one to disappear with it was far too optimistic.

“I imagine so,” Aura answered after a pause. “However, Nilda is the issue at hand now. I assume that, eventually, we will inspect their copy and once more record her name in the register, but the issue is when and how to bring up the topic.”

“We can draw up the necessary documents and use your magic to send a messenger within moments,” Fabio suggested.

The queen remained silent for a while before shaking her head. “No, this is not the time. The many nobles present for the wedding would lead to great shame on the Gaziel’s part if that information were made public. They were unaware of the situation and placed Nilda in charge of my husband’s stay. Revealing that the girl is not in fact nobility would cause an uproar.”

Allowing an illegitimate child who wasn’t even officially a noble to deal with royalty would be an utter scandal. Of course, the precise details and the fact that the misunderstanding had been on the royal’s side would permit it, but the timing here would give the impression that the Gaziels had overstepped.

“True, I can easily see the man not being able to contain himself when he discovers the truth, so I can understand your decision. However, leaving him unaware could cause problems of its own we cannot ignore. What do you think of that situation?”

Her answer was exceedingly brief. “I shall leave it to my husband.”

“Oh?”

There was a glint of intrigue in Fabio’s eyes as Aura offered him a slight shrug, waving the letter Zenjirou had sent.

“The very fact he has sent such a report means he has realized the possibility that Nilda is not nobility. Considering his caution, he will proceed under the assumption that the worst case is true and keep things in check if issues should arise.”

“You trust him a great deal.”

The queen puffed up her voluptuous chest at the secretary’s comment. “Of course. Questions of competence aside, there are none I trust more in terms of personality or ability to predict my feelings. While he may lack the ability to

bring about the *best* solution, I have no qualms with his skills for avoiding the *worst* situation.”

In Aura’s estimation, Zenjirou was akin to a dash drake that would head towards her goal even without instruction. While in speed and capacity he was inferior to even a packhorse, let alone a pack drake, he would never stray from that direction, and she trusted him to hold things in that way as best he was able.

With her trust in him taken into account, it was easy to understand why she would choose to refrain from sending someone to the march. Doing so would convey to all and sundry that it was an urgent matter and draw more attention than necessary. Considering the person she would be informing could not claim to be subtle, there was a significant risk of causing a real stir.

“Then we shall be leaving it to Sir Zenjirou until his return.”

“We shall. I can trust his judgment in such things as long as he refrains from exposing himself to danger as he did in Valentia. We would be best served by a more prudent approach.”

“Very well, then let us continue this once Sir Zenjirou has returned to the capital. I shall continue with preparations until that point.”

“That would be appreciated.”

If Zenjirou had been able to hear the queen and her confidant’s discussion, he would have been complaining about her faith in him being a significant burden.

Chapter 4 — A Duel of Words

“Again, I clearly saw it. I am absolutely certain that you left from the central passage. I will repeat it as many times as you wish. If you wish to claim that it was my mistake, then I request you offer some suitable foundation for your claim,” Freya said firmly, rage in her icy-blue eyes.

“Please, Princess Freya, calm yourself. Raymundo maintains that he left from the outer passage. I trust my subordinate’s word. Unfortunately, I can see no other conclusion but you being mistaken,” Christiano said placatingly, a strained smile on his face.

“Then by what basis do you claim I am mistaken? Conversely, there is no evidence that Lord Raymundo’s claims are correct either. He simply claims with no proof that I must be mistaken, so how should I calm myself?”

“I can understand your claim, but please, remain calm. A belligerent front will get us nowhere.”

Despite his smile and apparent ease with the situation, there was a hint of confusion in his eyes. It was no surprise. This had all started as a dispute between Raymundo, a knight of Nabara, and Nilda, the second daughter of the Gaziel family. Yet now, Freya was publicly pressing forward with it—something that would normally never be expected.

More than anything else, on the Southern Continent it was unthinkable for a woman to press a man like this, even if she was a princess. Aura was, naturally, an exception as she held the throne, but a woman would normally avoid being seen as aggressive towards a man in this way.

This was even truer when you considered Freya was supposed to be putting on the best show possible to attract Zenjirou, so it was unthinkable that she would take immodest actions or those beyond her station. Apparently, with that thought in mind, the knight leader cast a glance in Zenjirou’s direction—the prince consort was sitting next to Freya—but there was no help coming from that quarter.

Go for it, Princess Freya! If anything, he was mentally cheering her on.

The only reason Freya was being so aggressive was due to the request Zenjirou had made, so remonstrating her would mean he was nothing but a traitor. Zenjirou simply maintained his polite smile as he watched events unfold.

“A woman I may be, but I have experience in hunting and sailing at night. While I was not alone on the sea, I took my own share of night watches, so I cannot accept the assumption that I was mistaken without some kind of evidence.”

The Nabarans were not the only ones taken aback by the princess’s aggressive stance. Even the other leading party here, the Gaziels, Nilda and Xavier, were flustered.

“U-Um, Princess Freya? You do not need to go so far for me,” Nilda said. “It is more than enough to know you are on my side.”

“Indeed, Your Highness. Please, keep calm. Sir Zenjirou is watching.”

Nilda had never meant to make this into a big thing, but even Xavier was trying to reign things in despite his original plan to completely oppose the knight leader. The look he directed towards Zenjirou was a clear SOS, but despite the guilty feeling it caused, Zenjirou feigned ignorance. He kept his smile up, essentially saying that none of this concerned him.

Xavier’s expression flashed to confusion even as the knight leader’s morphed into contempt for a moment as he snorted. Despite the fact that Zenjirou’s true intentions remained unclear, everyone present was aware that he would not act to reign Freya in.

The others all looked away from Zenjirou and resumed the conversation. Chris gave a slight cough to bring things back on track before speaking.

“I understand your claim, Your Highness. Indeed, you likely have exceptional night vision for a woman and my earlier remarks were ill-considered. I offer my apologies,” he said with a seated bow of his head.

While she gave no verbal objection to the apology, the narrowing of her icy eyes made it clear she was even angrier. From Zenjirou’s perspective, her anger was perfectly justified, but it seemed the only people here who shared that

view were Freya herself and Skaji, standing behind her.

The Nabarans would obviously react that way, but even the Gaziels seemed to find no issue with the apology. Not even Nilda, who was also female, saw anything wrong with it. If anything, they all seemed to expect that she should at least verbally accept the apology.

The “for a woman” is just inviting more of her displeasure. That’s pretty rude for a captain who’s managed an intercontinental voyage.

Given her nighttime exploits in hunting and sailing, she was proud enough of her night vision to call it combat-ready. Praising it as “impressive for a woman” was no praise at all. As far as Zenjirou was concerned, it went without saying that she wasn’t going to accept his apology, but unfortunately, that perspective was not the standard on the Southern Continent. If anything, it was abnormal.

He watched somewhat uneasily, but fortunately, she managed to keep her emotions in check and not let her indignation run wild. Instead of acknowledging the apology, she continued the conversation.

“Sir Christiano, you have spoken for most of this meeting, but I would hear the man in question speak for himself. Sir Raymundo, we met that evening, no? Do you remember the events?”

The knight was taken aback for a moment but answered firmly. “Naturally, I do. I cannot be certain, as you did not speak at the time, but your hair shone brightly in the dark.”

The knight was correct. Freya’s blue-tinted silver hair stood out even at night. Of course, if it had been pitch-black, then it wouldn’t have been seen, but her hair shone brightly even in very dim light.

Freya seemed slightly mollified by the young knight’s answer, her expression easing as she nodded. “I am honored you remember me. I can therefore ask under the understanding that I was indeed present. I am certain that I saw you leave from the central passageway, Sir Raymundo. I have no intention of making you renege on what you have said, but I wish for you to make your statement here and now. Do you still not accept that?” she asked challengingly, her icy-blue eyes glinting.

She had possibly fanned the flames of his stubbornness, as his voice and face remained firm as he answered immediately. “I do not. I left the outer passageway, not the central one.”

With things having progressed so far, there was no way he could take it back now, so the man had a look of grim resolve as he spoke. Both parties had simply made claims, and neither had proof to unseat the other. The debate would simply rage on. While one may have eventually won the argument, at present, it seemed to go on forever.

“We have confirmed each other’s positions,” Xavier commented. “May I propose a break?”

No one refused. The Nabaran delegation left the room after accepting the suggestion, still hard-faced.

Once the two foreigners had left, Zenjirou finally spoke. “Lord Xavier, I am aware that we have intruded upon your business here. Of course, none of us have forgotten that the right and duty to mediate disputes here rests with the margrave. He shall have the final say, and we will accept it. I wish to make that clear.”

“I thank you for your forbearance, Sir Zenjirou.”

Zenjirou had expressed his apology in a serious tone, and as politely as he could given their respective positions, so Xavier accepted it with a look of relief.

This was one of the issues of a feudal system. The royal family was exceptionally powerful in Capua, but unilaterally trampling a fief’s rights was still a risky endeavor. A feudal lord had the right to deal with anything that occurred within their lands. Of course, if Zenjirou were directly involved, they would not be able to judge *him*. However, it was his partner—Princess Freya—who was involved, and thus the final decision rested with the margrave.

There was no issue with Zenjirou using his position to request the margrave’s consideration, and likewise, there was no issue with the margrave granting it. Still, it was answering a request, and the final decision had to be made by the margrave. Zenjirou was declaring that he was aware of that and was not going to infringe upon any of the man’s rights.

The tension left the air somewhat at that point, and Zenjirou gave a rather purposeful frown as he looked at the Northern princess at his side.

“However, I am Princess Freya’s ally here. While a large part of the reasoning is that she is my partner, I also consider her claim valid and her protest legitimate. I wish to make that clear as well.”

“I shall keep that in mind,” Xavier said with a bow, a meek expression on his face.



Freya and Zenjirou then returned to their allotted annex.

No sooner had Ines shut the door than Zenjirou turned to the silver-haired princess.

“Princess Freya, I thank you for following my wishes on this occasion. You have accepted a role that would normally never be asked of a woman, and I will repay you in some way in the future.”

As he was implying, her earlier aggression and obstinacy had been at Zenjirou’s request. There was a strong possibility that Nilda Gaziel was not officially a noble. Therefore, if they continued with Nilda opposing Sir Raymundo, it presented the very real possibility of an international incident further down the line.

Even if the girl were to apologize and the knights’ lies were accepted without question, it would not change the fact that Nilda had criticized a foreign visitor, especially given how far things had progressed. Therefore, having the highest-ranked person who had been there take the lead would lessen the risk of repercussions in the future.

The best-case scenario was for Freya to succeed in the negotiations and for the knight to admit he had lied. It went without saying that for the man in question, the fact that he had lied was a stain on his character that he would prefer to remove. The same was likely also true for his knight leader, Chris.

There was a good chance that they would suggest agreeing that the matter had never happened. If so, and it came out that Nilda was not a noble, then the Nabarans would lose any legitimacy in complaining.

Freya had gotten the short end of the stick as far as roles in such a scheme went, but she'd surpassed his expectations in how readily and well she had gotten on board.

"I would not deny your desires, Your Majesty. In addition, I have only spoken my mind here rather than engaging in any real act. If anything, I should thank you for granting me the opportunity to say what I wish." She smiled, a triumphant and almost aggressive light in her eyes.

"It does my heart good to hear you say that, though it also pains me to be unable to fully explain the specifics."

Zenjirou had not expressed to her his presumption that Nilda was not nobility. It was an obvious decision. While Freya was firmly set on becoming his concubine, and while she was there as his partner, she was still a member of foreign royalty. He couldn't trust her enough to put all his cards on the table. Freya, naturally, understood that as well.

"Do not let it concern you, Your Majesty. I am part of a royal family as well, so I understand the restrictions our positions place upon us regardless of our emotions or faith."

"Thank you, Princess Freya."

The relieved smile on his face was proof that although he hadn't consciously realized it, he was much closer emotionally with her now.

The comment about their emotions and faith implied that if their positions allowed it, Zenjirou would rather bring her into his confidence, and he hadn't refuted the suggestion. In other words, he wished to interact honestly with her, albeit unconsciously.

While he hadn't fully realized it himself, it seemed that Freya had.

"Ahem," she coughed, raising her hand to hide the clearing of her throat as well as the curve of the smile on her lips. "Excuse me."

However, when she lifted her head again, the smile was gone and her icy eyes had a hint of faith within them.

"I wish to confirm our future plans, then. Should I continue my stubbornness

in stressing the truth as I have been?”

As the conversation moved on to actual business, Zenjirou’s face smoothed out in thought as well.

“Let me think. I would say that would be for the best at present. Of course, an indefinite stalemate is far from desirable, so we do need to get this settled as quickly as possible.”

Currently, the two parties’ claims were mutually exclusive, and neither could present evidence or witnesses to cause the other to back down. The Nabarans probably felt much the same about an extended deadlock as well. The terror of this young postwar world was that even a trifling incident could develop into a war. There had been prior incidents between hunters who had chased drakes over a border, which had developed into full military conflicts.

That said, completely accepting the excuse to avoid war would lead to prestige and influence dropping. The country’s representatives, therefore, would privately want to avoid making it a problem while operating under the assumption that their peers wished the same, starting a game of chicken that neither side wanted.

The signs of said game were already on the horizon. They needed to come to a solution before it started, and Zenjirou more or less had a plan to do so. That plan was, however, full of holes and not something he could easily bring to completion. He had to ask for further cooperation from Freya.

“We know for a fact they are lying,” he said. “The problem is that we have no substantive proof, but if we can give sufficient testimony where they cannot worm around it, that would be sufficient. I have the makings of a plan to do so and would like your aid. Would you be willing?”

The princess’s short silver hair swayed with her nod. “Of course. First, though, I realize how strange this is to ask now, but how do you know the knight is lying?”

She looked him straight in the eyes. Of course, Zenjirou’s position meant that he would be on her side regardless of the truth, but his wording was no mere public stance. It showed an absolute certainty that Freya’s claims were correct and that the Nabaran knight was in the wrong.

Zenjirou blinked at the question, then smiled softly. “Well, that is rather simple. I was there, effectively. If you think back, the problem occurred where three parallel paths turned to intersect. The central passage leads to a guard tower, so it is restricted. The three of you came from the inner passage towards the main building and happened to see the Nabaran knight, Sir Raymundo, leave the central passage, and called attention to him, whereupon he claimed he had come from the outer passage towards the annex rather than the central one. That much is correct, no?”

“It is,” she answered with a nod.

Zenjirou nodded back and his expression took on a hint of triumph as he continued. “Do you remember that I arrived before too much time had passed? Where do you think I came from?”

Freya let out a slight gasp of surprise.

“Indeed, I came from the outer passageway. So if the knight’s claims were true, he would have been walking in front of me, and yet I saw no sign of that. It is therefore clear that he is lying.”

“I see, that does make sense,” she replied slowly.

It was simple when they recalled the events. Zenjirou had actually come through the passage almost immediately after Raymundo claimed he had used it, so unless the people involved were extremely slow, they should have met. After all, the passageway in question was a straight path. If they had both truly used it, they should have noticed each other.

“Then if you attest to that—” she exclaimed, seeing the chance to win in his explanation.

However, Zenjirou shook his head. “It would be meaningless now. Things have progressed too far, so I imagine they wouldn’t accept even my word. In fact, my testimony would mean nothing.”

He had arrived after the knight had left, which would be something only she could claim. This world had no mechanical methods to keep time, so the passage of time was rather rough. Even if she claimed he had arrived directly after the knight left, they could claim in turn that it was much longer and had

simply felt immediate, starting up another circular debate.

“However, would they not accept your testimony, unlike my own?”

Zenjirou once more shook his head at her wishful thinking. “Unfortunately, that would be rather difficult. While I am indeed both a royal and male, I am not a warrior.”

Zenjirou’s words would never be taken lightly; however, his own bold assertions that he was no warrior were a significant demerit here. Even if he made the statement that he had left that passage immediately after and had not seen anyone in front of him, whatever the circumstances were on the surface, it would be taken as the claim of someone who couldn’t fight. He was someone who wouldn’t have trained his night vision or his mind, which could easily be swayed by public opinion. Chris in particular clearly had a low opinion of him.

Naturally, Zenjirou was a royal of Capua, a powerful nation. If he were to stand firm and say, “I am correct. You are brave to dispute my view. Do you have the conviction to see it through?” then as long as they weren’t excessively stubborn, they would doubtless fold.

It went without saying, though, that this was the worst possible action he could take. If he was going to go that far, then simply taking it as a complete loss and saying it was all Freya’s mistake would be far better from an international relations standpoint. This meant he had to avoid saying things based on his own position.

Not being able to use my title means my word holds less weight than even a normal person...

Despite the almost torturous feeling of those thoughts, he turned his mind to coming up with a way of settling things as peacefully as possible.

At this point, there’s no way of leaving everyone satisfied. Well, he got us into this mess, so the knight can get the short end of the stick here.

“Regardless, it is clear that Sir Raymundo lied. Therefore, if we can cause the public to see it that way, we have won. To make that happen, I’ve come up with a bit of a trap, almost a con, in fact. I would like your cooperation, though.”

“That sounds interesting,” Freya answered, a gleam in her eyes as she smiled at the thought of crushing her enemies. “Of course, I will help however I am able to.”

“We will bid you farewell for the night, then,” Freya said after the conversation wound down, exiting the room with her guard and leaving Zenjirou alone with his maid.

Immediately, he slumped back onto the sofa. “Phew, that was crazy...”

“Good work, Sir Zenjirou. You may wish to pat the sweat from your neck.”

“Hm, thanks, Ines.”

Once his attentive maid had passed the towel over and he had wiped off his neck and face, he seemed to get a second wind as he let out a sigh.

“By the way, we’ve not heard anything back from Aura, have we?”

“No, we have heard nothing from the capital.”

Zenjirou frowned. “It’s late...isn’t it?”

“Indeed. The dwarf wyvern we have sent should have long since arrived. If Her Majesty had sent a reply, that too would have arrived.”

Teleportation would have been instant, and even a round trip by dwarf wyvern should have been completed by now, which meant that Aura wasn’t going to reply.

“So she doesn’t think it’s a big issue? Wait...no. She would have replied saying so if it wasn’t, which means it’s the other way around. I should assume this is delicate enough that she can’t just send back a reply by dwarf wyvern.”

Before long, Zenjirou had come to the conclusion Aura had been hoping for. It was a conclusion that anyone with the bare minimum of knowledge and consideration would reach.

Sending someone via teleportation would be stating that it was an urgent matter, and using a dwarf wyvern would risk the information getting out. With all of that together, the conclusion of it being delicate enough to be unable to simply reply was inevitable.

“No reinforcements, then. I guess I’d better do my best to stay away from the other nobles for now.”

As Zenjirou cradled his head, the middle-aged maid waiting at his side offered some soft advice. “I think that will work in general, but perhaps it would be best to lay the groundwork. At the very least, you should talk with General Pujol to an extent, I feel.”

Zenjirou sat upright, startled by the unexpected name. “General Pujol?! Surely he’d cause the biggest issue if he interfered!”

She seemed to have expected his reaction and maintained her calm tone. “That is precisely why. If he were to interject while things were progressing, the situation would become even more difficult. Therefore, would it not be best to prepare in advance and take precautions? After all, this was caused by a dispute between Lady Nilda and a Nabaran knight. He has married Lady Lucinda and so has the position of Lady Nilda’s brother-in-law.”

“Right...that sounds sensible...”

Zenjirou looked like he was fighting off a toothache as he put his head back in his hand. Being one of the brothers-in-law of one of the parties involved meant that he was removed from the situation, but not entirely. Pujol Guillén was just the kind of man who was willing to push through the hassle if he saw some gain in it.

“If the bastard’s going to be meddling anyway, we may as well get him on our side from the start.”

The uncharacteristically foul language wasn’t just caused by jealousy towards the former candidate for his beloved wife’s hand. Frankly, the way Zenjirou and the general would deal with events were almost diametrically opposed. The general did have at least some long-term foresight and would allow a temporary loss, but he had almost no consideration for any opponent’s feelings.

For example, in this case, Zenjirou’s best goal was to have it proven that the knight was lying and have the event be written off. Of course, there was an ulterior motive behind it that he couldn’t publicize: Nilda’s lack of acknowledgment as nobility. Even without that, he wouldn’t have felt any particular need to pursue an apology from them, because he saw earning their

resentment to be enough of a detriment to nullify the minimal gains. This perspective was perhaps due to his upbringing as an office worker in a peaceful country.

On the other hand, Pujol Guillén would show no mercy. In this instance, if he could get the fault to rest on their opponents, he would go for that weakness and pursue even the slightest benefit like a dog with a bone. Reparations, for example. Perhaps the knight's demotion or an official apology. He would show no concern for their pride or feelings and take all that he could. Any resulting resentment would not even enter into the equation. He seemed the kind of man to allow such grudges to build until they were at their limit, then force down any consequences with sheer strength and use that to acquire yet more reparations, killing two birds with one stone.

"Yeah, that'd definitely be bad. I'll have to arrange things with him and try to convince him to remain an observer. Can I persuade him alone, though?" The weight on his back was too much. Ines consoled him softly as he sighed.

"It is something that only you can do. If, however, it proves too difficult, perhaps you could acquire the cooperation of Lord Rafaello from the Márquez family? He is exceedingly skilled in negotiations."

"Hmmm...no. I can't do that." His heart wavered for a moment, but he shook his head regardless. "With the problems around Nilda, we need to keep the number of people involved as low as possible."

He personally had a rather positive impression of Rafaello, but Aura had warned him that he needed to take just as much care around the lord as with General Pujol. He couldn't simply rely on him. Despite the sweet temptation of simply delegating everything to Rafaello, his face tightened as he spoke to Ines.

"I'll persuade General Pujol alone. Shying away from keeping his nose out of this won't help. I'd rather keep our negotiations one-on-one. So you think you can arrange something?"

"Understood, I shall make preparations for an unofficial meeting as naturally as possible. That will suffice for General Pujol, but what of making arrangements with Margrave Gaziel?"

Zenjirou's face turned to deep thought once again.

“The margrave, huh? That’s a difficult one. Hmm, normally, considering he’s both Nilda’s father and the governor of the march, I shouldn’t make movements like that without involving him...but the main problem is Nilda not being on the register. I doubt I can get through an explanation without mentioning that...”

There was another problem as well. He was the prince consort and here as Freya’s partner, so an unofficial meeting with the margrave would inevitably be taken as him pressuring the man to decide in his favor, which could be taken as a violation of the margrave’s rights. Taking that into account, he decided not to involve the margrave beforehand.

“I won’t contact the margrave. I’m not entirely happy about it since he’ll have the final say, but the risks of getting him involved beforehand are higher.”

“Very well,” his loyal maid answered with a bow.

Chapter 5 — The Moment of Settlement

The dispute caused by the trifling disagreement between a knight of Nabara—Raymundo—and the second daughter of the Gaziel family—Nilda—finally seemed to be coming to an end. This followed several days of arguments befitting the phrase *ad infinitum*.

Those concerned had gathered in a large room for a final judgment from the margrave. The decision being given by a blood relation of one of the people involved would doubtless raise some, if not all, eyebrows if it had taken place within a constitutional country of the modern age, but it was simply a matter of rights in this feudalistic setting. Indeed, none of the delegates from Nabara had spoken a word against it. Of course, if the final decision given was seen to be excessively unfair, that would not remain the case.

As the people involved glared tensely at each other, the two men in charge of each side had severe expressions but still could not hide a trace of bewilderment as they communicated with their glances. If you were to force it into something verbal, the short conversation would be along the lines of:

“Hey! What’s going on?”

“Don’t know, don’t ask me.”

The two of them had originally met privately and arranged to use this as a form of training for their son and apprentice, respectively, but it seemed like that was not what had happened. The primary reason for that was, naturally, Princess Freya.

Even now, she was sitting in the center seat, all but saying that she was the main actor here, seated opposite the core of the Nabaran formation.

Nilda was fretting off to the side, and even Xavier—who should have been leading the negotiations—had been pushed into a supporting role with his seating position.

Xavier had been sending looks asking Zenjirou to do something about Freya

for a while, but Zenjirou simply smiled placidly. Now, Xavier finally understood. It wasn't that Zenjirou hadn't noticed the wordless SOS. He had noticed it but was ignoring it. The true meaning behind his comment that he was Freya's ally here had finally gotten through to Xavier.

Even if Freya acted in a manner unbecoming a lady, Zenjirou would not rebuke her, which meant that she would be taking over without question. However weak a woman's say in proceedings might be, a foreign royal—here as a local royal's partner—was hard to ignore.

It was no exaggeration to say that it was her presence here that had ruined the older men's plan for a mock battle between their two successors. On top of that, the finishing blow, as it were, to their scheme was sitting boldly in the visitors' seats.

General Pujol was sitting with his tree trunk-like arms folded and an amused grin on his face with his new wife, Lucinda, at his side. He had demanded to be allowed to attend as Nilda was now his sister-in-law, so he was not unrelated to the matter at hand.

He had promised to remain silent as long as nothing untoward took place, but the margrave didn't believe that for a moment. His ambitions and desires were strong, and he had both the initiative and ability to fulfill them.

The margrave wasn't sure he could keep his expression calm at the troublesome man's interference. In that respect, it was fortunate that it was nighttime.

The room and table in the center were lit with several oil lamps and candles, but even the most generous of descriptions would call them dim. The meeting was being held so late due to the rare instance of Zenjirou being selfish and saying that any other time was inconvenient.

The margrave took a deep breath subtly so no one would be able to see, offering a mental thank you to the unusual situation before speaking loudly.

"Everyone appears to be here. We shall hold the final discussion, then. The persons involved and responsible will make their positions clear and make their claims in accordance with their conscience. Once I have heard those views, I will hand down judgment as the lord in charge of this border march. Any who object

to that decision shall report it through the proper channels at a later date. Am I understood?”

Everyone present indicated their agreement. While he was on his way towards being elderly, the man was still strong and burly, and his words had a strength to them.

The “proper channels” here were the royal families involved. If the Nabarans were dissatisfied with the judgment, they would raise it with their own royal family, and that family would lodge a formal complaint with the Capuan royal family, demanding they speak with the Gaziels. That would officially make it an international incident. But a mere knight’s trespass—or lack thereof—being a cause for formal complaint wasn’t exactly realistic.

On the other hand, no “proper channels” existed for Xavier and Nilda as they belonged to the Gaziel family. His official word as margrave was law, even for his son and daughter. That in itself demonstrated how much of an issue Freya’s presence was.

Freya was a state guest, so if she could not abide by the margrave’s decision, she could protest through the Capuan royal family.

How did it come to this? the margrave wondered, resisting the urge to massage his throbbing temples as he continued in a low, carrying voice.

“We all seem to be in agreement. We shall now commence with the confirmation of standpoints and claims. The three who were present: you will answer without falsehood.”

“I will!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Understood.”

His illegitimate daughter, the foreign knight, and the princess from the Northern Continent all chorused their agreement as the man spoke with the full weight of his rights over the land.

Once he had seen all three of them nod in the flickering light from the oil lamps, he followed his plan and turned to his daughter first, keeping his voice as

stern as he could.

“Very well. We shall start with you, then, Nilda Gaziel. Where were you and what do you claim you saw on the night in question? Keep your answer concise and understandable.”

Her teeth chattered slightly as her father turned the question on her first. “Yes, Margrave. As I turned the corner of a passage that night, I came across a knight.”

So far, this was only the basics, so however unused to public speaking she was, she managed to answer smoothly.

“Who was this knight?”

“There was little light, so I was unable to distinguish his face. However, when I stopped him, he named himself as Knight Raymundo from the Kingdom of Nabara.”

Here, the margrave turned to face Raymundo.

“Sir Raymundo of the Nabaran delegation, do you have any objections or revisions to make with respect to Nilda’s claims here?”

The knight gulped. Age had not robbed the margrave of his gravitas, but Raymundo answered, enthusiasm clear in his voice.

“I do not, Margrave. Lady Nilda did indeed stop me there and I named myself.”

So far, both of them agreed on what had happened, so there was no real reason for him to dispute anything. The issues were yet to come.

The margrave purposefully cleared his throat and turned back to his daughter. “The location was at the confluence of three passageways, where they form a fork. Nilda, where do you claim Sir Raymundo exited from?”

“Sir Raymundo emerged from the central passageway.”

The young knight straightened indignantly but had the restraint to not protest without permission.

“Sir Raymundo, do you dispute this?”

Now asked for his input again, the young knight stood and replied. “I do. I exited not the central passage, but rather the outer passage.”

This reply had been given multiple times, but he repeated the contrary claim yet again. No one was surprised by the utterly irreconcilable claims at this point. That was why things had dragged on for this long, and none of it was unpredictable. If anything, the margrave wanted to sigh at needing to address the third person involved.

Regardless, he kept the stern look on his face as he turned to the woman in question. “Freya Uppasala. You were with Nilda at the time. Do you have a claim to make?”

The Northern princess’s hair shone in the firelight as she answered. “I do. My only statement is that I saw Lord Raymundo leave the central passageway.”

As she spoke strongly, her glare was focused not on the knight in question, but on the knight leader, Chris. It seemed that she saw him as her main target.

From Zenjirou’s perspective, that was understandable. The man was treating her like a typical unreasonable woman. Of course, he maintained his manners and behavior befitting royalty in public, but there was always an undercurrent of her “just being a woman,” or that she should “be more womanly and listen to the men” in his statements.

To Zenjirou, it looked like the knight leader actively wanted a fight, but annoyingly, he didn’t seem to be aware of that. If anything, his attempts seemed to be taken as keeping the peace and soothing her as much as possible.

This world is rough on women, Zenjirou thought to himself. Though he knew it was impolite, he could not help but send a mixed glance of respect and sympathy towards Freya.

He had spent much of his time in this world with Aura, who was an exception among exceptions, so he hadn’t truly internalized its attitudes towards women.

While Zenjirou was considering that, the margrave surveyed the assembly and spoke. “The claims are as you have heard. If any wish to add information, wish to offer a defense, or indeed ask questions, raise your hand. I will allow you to speak in turn. Any who do not abide by this and speak out of turn will be

ordered to leave.”

The three who had spoken thus far obviously agreed, as did the rest of those present. Incidentally, though there was another person present at the time—Freya’s guard, Skaji—she was not given the right to speak. This wasn’t due to a difference in social standing or gender, but rather of her position and employment. She was Freya’s confidante and guard, so was practically one and the same in terms of viewpoint. Private discussions aside, it was hard to think she would dispute her mistress in public. Giving her word any weight at all would be akin to giving Freya two votes.

The margrave had stated that giving one person two votes was unacceptable. If Skaji were better with words than Freya was, she could have been appointed as a representative while Freya herself remained silent.

Regardless, while anyone present could now raise their hand and speak, no one moved to do so. That was no real surprise. Both sides were directly opposed, and neither had strong enough evidence to forcefully crush the other’s claims, which meant there was an incentive not to speak with the risk of their words tripping them up.

It was rather difficult to press the attack in a situation where you were better served by being on the defensive. Still, the silence couldn’t last for long.

The Nabaran knight leader, Christiano Pinto, was the first to raise his hand through the pressing atmosphere in the room.

“You may speak, Christiano Pinto,” the margrave told him.

The knight leader gracefully rose from his chair. “Thank you, Margrave. I wish to question Lady Nilda. You came across our knight at a corner on the night in question, Lady Nilda, but do you recall what shoes he was wearing?”

“Huh? His shoes?” Nilda asked blankly in surprise.

“Do not speak without permission, Nilda Gaziel. Answer Christiano Pinto’s question.”

After her father rebuked her, the girl’s surprise and confusion continued as she stood and answered with what she could remember.

“Umm...I did not check Lord Raymundo’s shoes.”

“I see. Well, that is no surprise considering the chance nature of the late-night meeting. Raymundo was actually wearing leather footwear as he is now, worn by knights in general. Margrave, I would have Raymundo stand for demonstration purposes. May I?”

“You may.”

“Thank you. Raymundo, stand,” he ordered once he had received permission.

“Yes, sir. Excuse me!”

The slightly younger knight stood quickly at the knight leader’s order. The hard leather footwear he was wearing made a loud *clunk* on the flagstones.

“As you can hear, this footwear has hard soles and is very audible when walking on stone. While it is relatively restrained in a room of this size, a passageway entirely made of stone ought to amplify it significantly. Raymundo, walk in place.”

“Sir!”

The knight lifted and dropped his feet in turn in accordance with the order, making several thuds as he did. He continued walking in place in the dim light, the nobility watching silently. The scene was ridiculous, but not one of them was smiling.

“Lady Nilda, such footsteps ought to have been quite audible in the passageways, but at what point did you notice them?”

“Ah, well, um...I was speaking with Princess Freya as we walked, so not until we saw him.”

A triumphant grin flitted over Chris’s lips at her answer as Freya looked like she’d bitten into a lemon.

“I see. In other words, the two of you were so involved in your conversation that you did not notice the loud footsteps.”

“I...”

Finally, Nilda realized what the knight leader was implying and her face paled.

The main thrust of the issue here was whether Raymundo had left the central or outer passage. Nilda and Freya maintained that he had left the central passage while Raymundo himself contradicted them.

Of course, if Nilda and Freya's claim was correct, Raymundo would be lying, while if the opposite were true, the two of them would have been mistaken.

With those circumstances in mind, he had managed to get her to admit they were engrossed enough in their conversation that she hadn't heard the knight's footsteps, which in turn meant the claim they had been mistaken was much more credible.

The core of the argument here was that if they were focused on their conversation enough to fail to notice the footsteps, it wouldn't be unlikely for them to have only caught a glimpse and mistaken him as coming from the wrong passageway.

The logic was slightly arbitrary, but it *was* persuasive.

While it was only slightly, Xavier felt the balance shifting in the Nabarans' direction and hurriedly raised his own hand.

"Margrave, I request permission to speak!"

"Hmm, Xavier Gaziel, you may speak."

The young man stood at his father's permission, his face clearly agitated even in the dim light. "I have a question for Lord Raymundo. On the night in question, you encountered Princess Freya's bodyguard, Lady Skaji, as well. While the other two women were wearing soft-soled shoes, she was wearing similar footwear to yourself. Did you hear those footsteps?"

The logic behind his desperate question was simple. If Raymundo had not noticed similar footsteps, then that essentially canceled out the knight leader's claim.

However, the logic was unreasonable. The young knight answered in a slightly bewildered tone of voice, "No, I did not. Because, well, as Lady Nilda said, she was talking with Princess Freya, so perhaps their voices drowned out the footsteps? I did, of course, hear them talking, though."

“Ah...” Xavier was lost for words at the rather obvious explanation.

Once the knight had said it, the answer was self-evident. However loud footsteps were, they would still be quieter than a conversation. Raymundo had noticed the group through their conversation rather than their footsteps and the others had been engrossed in their conversation and so had not noticed him.

Xavier had accidentally added credence to the claim that Raymundo had had a more accurate awareness of their surroundings on that night.

“Guh...”

Seeing the man’s darkened skin flush a ruddy red, Zenjirou knew the time had come to speak up. *I wanted things to be a bit more airtight, but if I keep watching it, they’ll move towards a decision all right, and not a good one.*

He took a breath to steady himself and then smoothly raised his hand. “Margrave Gaziel, I seek permission to speak.” His voice was not overly loud, but the entire room stirred. That was inevitable really. So far, he’d allowed his partner free rein and acted as if none of it bothered him. His title as prince consort gave him weight indeed.

There was a definite wariness to the margrave’s expression as he sized up Zenjirou before answering. “You may speak, Zenjirou Capua.”

Zenjirou’s skin crawled as the attention of the room focused on him. Still, he stood. “I have a question for Knight Leader Christiano. You questioned earlier whether those involved heard the footsteps, but is that really such an important issue?”

Chris must not have thought the questioning would be directed his way, as he looked taken aback, but his expression soon returned to an easy smile. “It is. While I would not say it is the *biggest* issue, I believe it is an important factor to take into account. While your lack of combat experience may make it harder for you to understand, a warrior trains his ears and night vision just as much as he does with weapons to improve his chances of spotting an enemy. Demonstrating the difference between a person’s abilities after receiving that specific training and having not done so is significant.”

There was a layer of disdain within that explanation. In fact, Freya's eyes narrowed in anger at the slight as General Martin let out a soft sigh in the background.

Zenjirou, though, took no notice of the knight leader's attitude as he continued. "I see, then you would say that if I did not spot nor hear Lord Raymundo in the outer passage, it would be down to my lack of abilities, Lord Christiano?"

"What?"

The question must have truly come out of nowhere for him as the knight leader let out a half-witted noise of confusion. Zenjirou kept his serious expression on his face as he explained.

"I actually arrived there just after you, having walked down the outer passage. When I arrived at the crossing point, the three were standing there, so it cannot have been long since Lord Raymundo left. That would then imply that when I used the corridor myself, Lord Raymundo would have only been slightly ahead. Still, I did not see or hear anyone ahead of me. I would also add that I walked in silence, not speaking with anyone."

There was a thin sheen of sweat on Raymundo's forehead as the man wavered after the explanation. Seeing his subordinate falter, the knight leader moved to support him, forcing a smile as he answered.

"If you will excuse me, would that perhaps be due to your own lack of ability in that area, Your Majesty? While I understand this may sound rude, you appear to have no training as a combatant, which would mean you would not notice Raymundo if he had been some distance ahead of you."

Zenjirou nodded several times at the contempt in Chris's voice, his face calm. "I can understand the logic. But what of the reverse? As you indicated, I am no warrior. My night vision, my hearing, and above all, my combat ability are on the level of women and children. I therefore always have my knight Natalio escorting me. Natalio, of course, wears similar footwear and would have relatively loud footsteps. So I ask you, Lord Raymundo of Nabara, as you walked along the outer corridor, do you recall hearing footsteps from behind?"

"I..."

While the sweating knight might seem cornered, this was actually a make-or-break situation for Zenjiro as well. If Raymundo didn't lie as Zenjiro hoped he would, his plan would be for naught. His heart almost seemed like it would be audible to the room while Raymundo firmed his resolve.

"Now that you mention it, I do recall it. I thought I heard footsteps while I was walking and turned to look. However, I simply assumed it was the echo of my own footsteps at the time and did not pay it any further mind," the young knight answered with an unsure shake of his head.

Zenjiro wanted to scream out, "Got you!" Such was his joy. The knight's superior seemed to notice Zenjiro's triumphant look as he stood and spoke loudly.

"Your Majesty, as Raymundo said, footsteps echo significantly on flagstones, so it can be hard to distinguish between your own and those of someone some distance away, even for a trained warrior."

Maybe he had heard them or maybe he had not. The defense was ambiguous but still valid. However, from Zenjiro's perspective, it was far from pertinent. The issue he was focusing on was not whether the knight had heard the footsteps or not, but rather the statement that he had turned to look. The baited hook had been well and truly taken. All he had to do now was reel it in and not miss anything as he did.

Zenjiro kept a calm smile on his face as he continued slowly. "Lord Raymundo, Knight Leader Chris. As we have repeatedly established, I have no training as a warrior, so my own situational awareness is much like that of a woman or child. I would quite agree that in those circumstances there is little surprise in my not seeing or indeed hearing a person walking in front of me. However, I will state that my own guard Sir Natalio did not identify any such figures either."

At that, the margrave broke in from where he had thus far watched in silence. "Zenjiro Capua. A guard or attendant's word is meaningless here."

This was the same reason Skaji had not been allowed to testify. A guard who had sworn their loyalty to their charge would place more importance on affirming their liege's word than on honesty. Therefore, they would inevitably

agree with whatever their master said and so were discounted as sources. Zenjirou had brought up his guard despite knowing this to stress the distinction between his claims and those of the Nabarans.

“Your Majesty. The passage in question is fairly long. The surroundings would have been completely dark by that point. Perhaps this explains why you and your attendant were both unable to notice Raymundo as he walked a significant distance ahead of you. Indeed, Raymundo apparently barely heard you but still mistook your attendant’s footsteps for his own, so perhaps there was a large span between the two of you?”

Chris’s statement was stressing that there was no contradiction, and Zenjirou gave a marginally exaggerated nod.

“I see. I can certainly understand the logic in that statement. I still have my doubts, though. How is it that a trained warrior such as Lord Raymundo was unable to notice me behind him?”

“Again, Raymundo has stated that he did notice but assumed it was his imagination at the time—” The man had an exasperated look on his face as he repeated his earlier argument, but Zenjirou cut him off.

“I have no training, and so therefore my night vision is like that of a woman or child. As shameful as it is to admit, my courage is even less. Therefore, if it is even slightly dark, I will not *walk outside without a light*.”

There was a strangled gasp as the knight leader lost his composure for the first time that night. Zenjirou was certain that his implied statement had gotten across to the man and smiled purposefully at him, retrieving his hand-cranked LED flashlight from his pocket.

It was to get the greatest effect from this moment that he had insisted the meeting be held at night.

“This is something I brought with me from my hometown. We can ignore the precise explanation for now, but you can consider it akin to a magic tool for illumination. On the night in question, I used it like so, holding it out and illuminating the path in front of me as I walked.”

As he spoke, Zenjirou flicked the switch. Naturally, he’d made sure to crank it

beforehand and had topped up the battery.

“Guh?!”

“Ergh...”

“What?!”

“How on...”

The oil lamps were no comparison to the brilliant white of the LED as it shocked everyone present.

“So I ask you, Lord Raymundo.... You stated that you turned when you heard footsteps, correct? I would ask the same again, how did you not notice me behind you?”

As he voiced the question, Zenjirou turned the light to fall on the young knight. He was ashen-faced, with sweat shining on his forehead as his lips quivered, cast into sharp relief in front of everyone by the artificial light.



“Er...I...I...”

As he saw the knight flounder, the hot flush Zenjirou had been feeling instantly cooled. *I’ve got him publicly cornered.*

That wasn’t normally how he wanted to settle things, as it was far too easy to foster resentment from the defeated party. However, Zenjirou hadn’t been able to prepare any other way for things to end in his own victory.

Rafaello Márquez might have been able to end this more peacefully. General Pujol would have probably done the opposite, managing to get an even harsher, perfect victory. He’d probably not have paid any mind to resentment from them, though.

Despite knowing it was meaningless, Zenjirou couldn’t help but compare himself to other more capable people. He caught a glimpse of a tiny grin on said general’s face and changed gears, beginning his final statements to bring this to an end.

“Would someone truly not notice this light from behind them along that passage? Especially if they had turned to face it? I stress once again, I am no warrior. My night vision is akin to a woman or child’s, perhaps even lower. Yet, I feel certain that I would have noticed being illuminated from behind however far back this light had been. So, Lord Raymundo, could you explain why someone with far more training than I would not notice a light I am certain that I would have seen?”

The questioning had left the knight with nowhere to run and was unanswerable. On top of that, the young man could not even hide his expression in the darkness due to the harsh white light.

The knight seemed to realize that any excuse would be futile and appeared to admit defeat, collapsing back into his chair. Things were extremely simple from there.

The knight had folded entirely. If he admitted his own falsehood had caused this, that he had truly left from the central passage, there were no more complications.

“So, Knight Raymundo of Nabara, you admit your falsehood?” the margrave

asked.

"I do," Raymundo answered eventually, his voice almost inaudible as he remained slumped in his chair.

"Hmm, then what to do..." The matter was more or less settled, so the margrave frowned.

Once the major issue of who was correct and who was wrong had been solved, all that remained was to decide how much and in what manner the one in the wrong would pay.

It was surprisingly difficult. The initial fault lay with Raymundo for trespassing on a restricted area. While it sounded rather exaggerated, the Gaziels themselves thought of it as somewhere easy to stumble into, and even if that happened, there was no real harm. Therefore, a verbal warning would have been sufficient.

However, with things having progressed so far, there were many who would not accept a verbal warning. The margrave glanced at the leader of that group.

The girl with short blue hair was glaring, as he had thought, practically demanding he do something about it as she directed her gaze at the two Nabarans on the other side of the table. He highly doubted a verbal warning would be enough for the Northern princess.

Despite that, the Nabaran side had been greatly shamed for something that could have easily been a wrong turn. Heaping a hefty punishment on top of that would lead to resentment, even if it was known to be unjustified.

The knight was in shock while his defender, Chris, was chewing his lip as he bore the disgrace. He likely felt like he had already lost face. If it would not come back to bite him, it would be fine. With those concerns in mind, the margrave looked towards General Martin as the other man waited in the background. The huge general closed his eyes for a moment before dipping his wolfish head in a short nod.

This will do. Leave the rest to me, the gesture implied, letting the margrave breathe a sigh of relief. General Martin had a strong reputation for keeping his men in line, so if he took responsibility for what was to come, it would solve the

majority of their problems.

His shoulders now much lighter, the old lord directed his gaze to the man of the royal family who had brought about this conclusion.

“I will now convey my decision. Is there anything you wish to say before I do so, Sir Zenjirou?”

Addressing Zenjirou with ‘sir’ again made a clear distinction between now and during the trial. It was evident that although he would be making the final judgment, he had shown consideration to his liege.

Realizing that, Zenjirou thought hard about how to best convey his desires. “I suppose I do. We are somewhat unfamiliar with how things are done here, so I imagine in some way we have pushed this into an event that need not have happened. Therefore, as far as those from the Kingdom of Nabara are concerned, I would ask nothing more than that they admit their mistake. Making it into a large issue is unusual, as it was a trivial disagreement that otherwise would have amounted to nothing, I would say.”

In other words, he was saying, “Sorry for getting Princess Freya caught up in this without consideration. We just want an apology. Actually, could we just pretend it never happened?”

He hadn’t spoken around his intentions too much, so even the margrave’s relatively poor ability to deduce subtlety was enough to recognize what he was trying to say. The creases upon the old lord’s forehead were wiped away by a happy look as he cleared his throat to smooth over the shift.

“Indeed. I hear you well, Sir Zenjirou. Now, as margrave, I will pass my judgment.”

As he spoke, everyone present looked at him and waited obediently. Zenjirou was no exception. The margrave was, ultimately, the one with the greatest authority here. Even though Zenjirou was the highest-ranking person present, he had no right to pass judgment in a fief. Indeed, even as a royal, he could not overturn the feudal lord’s decision. The margrave’s earlier invitation to speak and be considered was the borderline of what was allowable.

“The issue today is twofold. First is that Knight Raymundo of the Nabaran

delegation *mistakenly* entered a restricted area. The second is that when that was brought to his attention, he attempted to falsify his way out of it. The trespass itself is not a major concern. The lack of a guard and indication that the area was restricted is indeed partially our fault. However, I cannot overlook the attempted falsehood that the warning was mistaken. I order the party from the Kingdom of Nabara to admit their fault and offer an apology.”

“Understood,” replied Christiano Pinto, his chiseled face set into a stony mask. It was far from the result he would have hoped for, but he understood how foolish it was to argue with the margrave’s decision.

The margrave gave a small nod and continued. “Very well. Then that concludes the matter. Making this any more of an issue will serve none of us well. The matter will be settled upon the offering of an admission of fault and apology from one party and its acceptance from the other. I would like to propose that this not be taken any further. What say you all?”

His final “suggestion” was the only thing that exceeded his authority as margrave. A feudal lord had authority over anything that happened within his lands, but the people involved on this occasion were connected to royalty from both his own country and another. The Nabarans could bring it to their monarch and make it an international incident, bringing it to a higher authority to appeal, and Zenjirou could bring an objection with Aura’s permission.

Of course, any appeal or objection would still leave the right to a retrial with the margrave, so it would not have any real effect, but it would make things much more complicated.

Fortunately, Chris immediately agreed to the margrave’s suggestion. “Very well, I have no objection to leaving the matter there.”

His pride was ruining him emotionally now, but the knight leader was not a person to allow that to rob him of the ability to make the correct decision. The initial cause was dishonor on a Nabaran knight’s part, so considering the matter to have never happened was no detriment to them.

Zenjirou didn’t let the opportunity pass and voiced his own support. “I have no objection myself. I am of the opinion that considering this to not have happened would be the best for relations between both our lands. What say

you, Princess Freya?”

“If you believe so, Your Majesty,” she answered, her sharp gaze still focused on the knight leader.

Her blatant displeasure was a way of saying that though she didn’t wish to reconcile, she would agree with Zenjirou’s decision to do so. To the onlookers, it appeared to be Zenjirou “dealing with her.” The woman had shown behavior ill befitting her gender, but would—though visibly reluctantly—agree with “her” man and follow his decision.

It showed Zenjirou to be not only her partner for the wedding, but a man she would obey sincerely. It wasn’t something he was happy about, but it made him appear much more reliable to the margrave.

“In that case, I call this court to a close.” The margrave’s tone couldn’t conceal his relief at ending with the bothersome event.

“Princess Freya, Lady Nilda, I truly apologize,” Raymundo said with a deep bow of his head.

The young knight’s haggard bearing made Nilda, given her kind nature, forget about their earlier interactions and feel rather sympathetic.

“I hope you will ensure that a similar thing does not happen in the future.”

However, while her training as a noble was lacking, she knew she couldn’t act modestly here, so that was the response she chose.

For her part, Freya had a pleasant personality as well and was intoxicated with the sense of victory as she thought back on their interactions. “I have faith that you will avoid allowing such an occurrence to take place again,” she told him, those being the words *she* chose despite being raised as a lady. She knew that kowtowing here would be a diplomatically poor choice as well.

“I will take my leave, then,” the knight said, unable to hide his relief at the apology being accepted so easily.

However, a voice called out to him as he went to leave. “Wait, we still have words to exchange.”

The voice was Zenjirou’s, coming from where he had watched the apology.

The call surprised not only the knight in question, but Freya and Nilda as well.

“Margrave Gaziel’s judgment was that those at fault should admit their wrongdoing and apologize. While you were the one to falsify your statement, and so you may apologize alone, the person who carried on these negotiations in spite of the falsehood was Lord Christiano. Lord Christiano, there is no need for you to apologize, but I would have you admit your mistake here, that Princess Freya has night vision to rival that of an average soldier and no lack of courage in the face of darkness.”

There was a strangled gasp. The knight leader must not have expected things to be directed towards him, and he looked like he’d just been struck from the side. His expression made Zenjirou regret the demand, which was rather unnecessary, but it was something he had wanted to do. This was not a matter of benefit to the country, but of acting in good faith towards Freya.

Having her bear the brunt of the events would certainly lead to a loss of reputation given the Southern Continent’s view of women. She had done so because he had asked it. The political realities meant that he had been unable to explain why. Indeed, even he was not yet certain that Nilda wasn’t a noble, so he could not risk that matter leaking.

All of this meant that he knew he’d had her play along and come off worse despite not knowing the reasoning for it. Zenjirou was someone who preferred to pay a debt as quickly as he was able to. It was a common view in Japan, and he had a tendency to set himself in a lower position than those he felt indebted to.

With that said, none of that had anything to do with the knight leader. From his perspective, Zenjirou had personally called him out while he was trying to deal with the disgrace of being unable to protect his subordinate, to say nothing of the fact that Zenjirou was someone he looked down upon due to not being a warrior.

The irritation and displeasure, coupled with his rage and feelings of inadequacy all piled atop each other, pulling his emotions to a dangerous depth. Reflexively, he moved his right hand to his waist and took half a step back...where his foot fell with a slight splash into a shallow pool of water.

The water splashed through Christiano's shoes, and its chill cooled his mind before he could even wonder why there was water here.

He realized that in response to the country's royalty insisting that he put the demands placed upon him by one of that country's feudal lords into practice, he had immediately moved aggressively.

What am I doing?! he thought to himself.

The very instant he realized what he'd done, a cold sweat gushed down his back. Fortunately, despite the "aggressive movement," it had been extremely minimal and rapid, so barely anyone appeared to have noticed. He was lucky that the room was so dimly lit with the oil lamps.

"Indeed, I should apologize personally as well," he said quickly, hoping to get out of it. "I was wrong. Princess Freya, you have both the knight vision of a warrior and the courage to allow that vision to remain unclouded. I should not have looked upon you as any other woman."

Though he admitted fault, as long as he avoided an explicit apology, it seemed the knight's pride would allow it. The slight lift of his shoulders and chin was likely purposeful. Allowing his spine to bend or his head to drop would give a stronger impression of apology and regret.

Zenjirou couldn't help but find it amusing. *He's like a kid losing to a parent or teacher in an argument and being forced to apologize.*

Zenjirou's thoughts would doubtless enrage the knight leader if he were aware of them, and Freya smiled victoriously at his side as she answered.

"I am glad you understand, Sir Christiano."

If he had decided to stop there and just leave, perhaps things would have ended amicably. However, he seemed to either feel that saying that and departing would be running away, or that he *had* to have the last word as he remained and faced Zenjirou, a false smile on his face.

"That reminds me. I have not seen her personally, but I have heard that Queen Aura was a hero in the war and led her men to a great many successes."

"That's right. I have not seen any of that directly, but I have heard much the

same.” With his apology and retraction given, Zenjirou didn’t really have any feelings towards the knight leader, so he answered the young man easily.

“Queen Aura and Princess Freya both are extremely charming women, but they are far more gallant than a woman would normally be. I suppose there might be some truth to the saying of ‘being attracted to what one lacks?’”

It went without saying that this was a significant dig at Zenjirou for his own lack of martial prowess.

While Freya’s smile vanished as she stood at his side, Zenjirou reacted by bursting into laughter as he answered.

“Maybe so. The attraction between people is not quite so simple, though. Besides, if you were to follow that kind of metric, what kind of woman would attract you, Lord Christiano?”

“Eh, well...” he said before falling silent at the retort.

The knight leader was good-looking, a capable combatant, intelligent, healthy, and lordly. He had the blood of the royal family flowing through his veins. He was just as proud as well. Asking him what kind of women would attract him assuming that they possessed characteristics he did not put him at a loss.

If he answered with, “A beautiful woman,” then it would be akin to saying he was unattractive. Likewise, answering with “intelligence” would be like saying he was unintelligent, and the same for a woman of a good disposition. Of course, he could hardly say that he would want a woman lacking all of those things either.

Zenjirou had only meant it as a humorous reply, but the lack of response meant that the knight leader had taken it as yet another trap for him. His weaknesses could be considered an inability to accept that loss and a lack of flexibility.

Unable to put up with constantly being on the back foot, the knight leader kept a smile on his face as his tone grew even harsher. “You are quite correct. I misspoke. Perhaps the phrase is only fitting for those with a clear shortcoming.”

Even Zenjirou felt his face sour at that. Of course, it wasn’t to do with the man hitting a nerve or Zenjirou trying to hold back his anger. Zenjirou was shocked

and confused as he thought, *Whoa, you're going that far in public?*

While at this point it went without saying, Zenjirou was royalty, and he was the spouse of the current Capuan monarch, so he was very nearly its core. While the knight leader was heir to a family with its own royal ties, coming from a weaker country like Nabara put him in a considerably lower position.

Perhaps he should give the man a warning. Zenjirou had started to consider it, despite his usual demeanor, but unfortunately, he was slightly too slow to move.

“Knight Leader Christiano Pinto of Nabara. What was it you just said? And who was it directed towards?”

Forestalling Zenjirou, the harsh voice came from none other than General Pujol Guillén, one of Capua’s heroes.

“General Pujol?” Zenjirou cried in surprise.

The huge man gave an unusually subservient bow in answer and then spun around, his body wreathed in anger as he addressed the knight leader.

“We were in the midst of a trial until now, led by Margrave Gaziel, so I would overlook any statements made during it, but that no longer applies.”

Zenjirou immediately realized that though the general was facing away from him, he was the one being spoken to.

So that's your plan! Damn it! he thought, doing his utmost to keep his expression placid.

Zenjirou had met with the general before the trial to prevent exactly this kind of situation. It boiled down to essentially, “I will solve this; you keep your nose out,” and he had managed to get the general to agree.

The general had therefore remained silent for the whole trial, but this was technically *after* the issue had been solved, so it no longer fell under their prior agreement.

Argh, you idiot Chris! You're a damned idiot too, Pujol! I'm the biggest idiot, though!

While Zenjirou was focused on regretting his own lack of care, the general

had continued his advance.

“Christiano Pinto, you appear to be unaware, but Sir Zenjirou here is part of our country’s royal family. He is Queen Aura’s husband, no less, so he stands above us all. What did you say to him? Repeat it again, in front of me.”

Chris’s face had paled visibly, even in the dim light. He was only just realizing he had been allowed the sarcasm and verbal attacks thus far because the target of them had said to treat them as no issue. It was too late now.

“My apologies, I went too far!” he exclaimed, his head practically snapping to point down.

This is really bad. I need to get this dropped as quickly as I can. While Zenjirou was frantic at the sudden escalation, the general was currently rebuking a foreigner to protect his honor as the prince consort. Stopping the general now would be cutting him off. *I can’t just deny someone acting to protect my honor, and he knows I’d think like that. He planned this, damn it all!*

While it sounded almost paranoid, he was fairly sure he understood the man enough to say that it wasn’t. Even as Zenjirou was stuck without recourse, the general was advancing further.

“I said nothing about an apology. I told you to repeat yourself. Now do so. Anything that you said directly to a member of the royal family can be said in front of their subordinate. Speak.”

“I apologize,” Christiano answered after a pause.

While it looked like the general was picking on him without cause, there was a goal behind it.

“Again, do not just apologize. If you want to apologize, say what you are apologizing *for*, and *then* you can apologize.”

Chris still had his head bowed in earnest apology, but the general was merciless. He was persisting in making the man admit what he had meant, who it was intended for, and what he had said. Chris knew that if he capitulated, it would be exposing a weakness, and he was desperately trying to end it before that.

“I apologize. I was rash, and I beg your forgiveness.”

The saving grace for the man who had stepped into a pitfall came, of course, from his superior, the highest-ranking among the Nabaran delegation, General Martin Nadal.

“Your Majesty, my subordinate has been rude, and I offer my apologies,” he said, folding his bearlike body in half as he bowed deeply to Zenjirou.

“Your Excellency!” The knight leader exclaimed but was lost for anything further.

General Martin was a hero without peer in Nabara. His status was equal to General Pujol’s, but if one were to speak of relative importance to each of their countries, he would be several times more so.

A country like Capua had Marquis Lara, who was on the same level as him, and several more people a step down in the hierarchy, such as Margrave Gaziel.

On the other hand, General Martin was internationally famous and could potentially have an even stronger influence than his Capuan counterparts.

Now, a pillar of his country was bowing his head to apologize for the knight leader’s gaffe. Christiano Pinto was aware, all too late, of how momentous his failure here could be.

“I apologize deeply, Your Majesty!” he exclaimed, lowering his head even more than his superior had.

There wasn’t a trace of any of his earlier contempt for Zenjirou in his frantic behavior now. A royal from a country as powerful as Capua was someone you *couldn’t* look down on, no matter how lacking in martial skill or how cowardly they may be. The young leader had felt that truth for himself.

Zenjirou wanted to end this as smoothly as possible, so it was a good opportunity. He refused to allow the opportunity to pass and immediately began to speak.

“Pardon the digression, but would this perhaps be the first time Lord Christiano has left his own country?”

“It is indeed,” General Martin answered respectfully, sensing the lifeboat

Zenjirou's question represented.

It was even true. Christiano was not yet twenty, and this was his first foreign duty. At that answer, Zenjirou gave a blatant shrug and sigh.

"Then this may well have been inevitable. Lord Christiano, culture and outlook along with the norm are things that can change dramatically as you cross borders. I trust you are aware of that now?"

It was somewhat absurd coming from Zenjirou, considering he had not set foot outside Capua since he had arrived—or indeed left Japan while he was on Earth—but the main goal here was to provide a reason he could forgive the gaffe, so he would neglect that fact.

"I am, deeply so, sir!" Chris answered, with no way to know Zenjirou's circumstances—head still facing down with a mournful expression.

Zenjirou turned his gaze to the general, who still had his own head bowed as well.

"General Martin, there is no one who makes no mistakes while they are young. Would you not agree that it is the role of experts and elders to instruct and guide those youths?"

"It is as you say, Your Majesty. That is also something I have fallen short at."

"Very well."

Zenjirou nodded in satisfaction. Chris's superior was taking responsibility for his slip. With such a renowned hero lowering his head to apologize for the slight, taking that itself as sufficient compensation was not particularly odd.

While General Pujol may have felt it lacked his ever-sought practical utility, even gaining such submission from a hero of Nabara was a good result. At the very least, it was a worthwhile accomplishment for a newly minted royal like Zenjirou.

However, before Zenjirou could declare the matter settled, the ever "hungry wolf" Pujol Guillén spoke up again. This time, his voice was bright and cheery, a complete turnaround from earlier.

"That reminds me, Lord Christiano, you would be the heir to the Pinto family,

if I am not mistaken. Considering both your position and skill, I can understand there is a dearth of people in your own lands that could train you strictly. With that in mind, perhaps my rebuke was somewhat immature.”

The man’s voice had become almost coaxing. Both Zenjirou and the other general had a premonition that this was about to get worse, but Chris didn’t know the general as well as they did, so he reflexively leaped for the feigned forgiveness.

“Yes, sir. As much as it shames me, I have keenly felt my own shortcomings.”

With that statement of admission from the man in question, General Pujol’s dark eyes gleamed. “What would you say to remaining here, then? If you learn how to interact with those higher than yourself in a foreign country, considering your youth, it would be a large boon for your future.”

While the words seemed kind, it was still a hostage situation he was proposing. Suddenly, the knight leader’s thoughts stopped as his status was no longer guaranteed abroad.

A cold sweat sprang up on Martin’s forehead next to him as the man raised his head and glared at his counterpart.

“That is unacceptable, General Pujol. He is yet immature as a warrior. While understanding how to behave in diplomatic and societal negotiations, I cannot countenance allowing his combat ability to suffer while prioritizing thusly.”

“Oh, you need not worry, General Martin. While he stays within our country, I will take responsibility for his training. Would you be dissatisfied with me as a trainer? What say you, Lord Christiano?” he asked with a smile more akin to a wolf baring its teeth.

“I-I...”

Pujol’s fame was far too widespread across the continent to say that he would be dissatisfied. However, answering in the converse would practically be signing his life away, to say nothing of the fact that this was ostensibly a suggestion given out of kindness on top of forgiving the knight leader’s mistake, which made it even worse.

“I understand that General Martin has been aiding you and that his own

prowess is a wonder to behold. I would do no less and spend as much time and effort necessary to see your skills flourish.”

His smile was that of a beast with its prey brought down before it. Chris was almost resigned to his fate at this point when someone else interjected.

“Oh? Then you would be leaving me alone as soon as we are wed? You will make me lonely, Sir Pujol,” came a clear female voice from his side as the general’s smile grew.

“Wh— Lucinda?” Pujol showed the first chink in his composure that day.



The owner of the voice—Lucinda—had hiked up her elegant indigo dress as she approached her new husband.

“Sir Pujol, you wish to invite a guest so soon?” she asked with a slight inclination of her head. “While I have welcomed those from Nabara on several occasions as part of the Gaziel household, this would be the first time as a Guillén. I will do my utmost to welcome them, but I still have my fears that it would not be enough. Loath as I am to admit it, there were occasions as a Gaziel where I have done so and caused a burden to the family.”

While the words themselves were of a woman not seeing the big picture, Pujol had spent several days in the same room as her and was well aware she was not so foolish. With that thought in mind, he could see the implied meaning.

The statement about welcoming Nabarans as a Gaziel was an allusion to the borders their lands shared. The fact that it would be the first time she did so as a Guillén but that she would do her utmost was akin to saying, “I am part of the Guillén family now and you are its head, so I shall follow your decision.”

The final statement of the burdens it had caused the Gaziels was a message that this would cause friction between Nabara and her maiden family, and it was a plea for some consideration on that front.

“Hmm...” the general mused, casting his eyes to where the margrave looked on from a short distance away. The second their eyes met in the dim light from the oil lamps, the margrave’s gaze sharpened to the point it was almost audible as he glared at the general.

“You call yourself my son-in-law even as you bring problems upon our heads?!” was clearly conveyed in his eyes.

The general made a quick mental calculation. He weighed the benefits of gaining access to the next likely core of the Nabarans and the disadvantages of his marriage into the Gaziel family allowing the disgrace to fall on him.

He soon came to a conclusion. Once he had done so, he felt no hesitation or shame over taking his words back. It might be embarrassing from a human perspective, but in noble society, it was a huge advantage.

“Indeed, leaving my new wife alone to devote myself to training a new disciple is perhaps slightly ill-advised at present. Lord Christiano, I apologize, but I will be unable to do so.”

“Not at all; I appreciate the offer regardless,” the knight leader answered, still with his head bowed. Then he let out a long sigh as if he’d been holding his breath the whole time.

Chapter 6 — The Various Conclusions

While there had been some unforeseen ups and downs, everything had ended without real incident, and Zenjirou returned with Freya to the annex.

Natalio and Skaji were the only two following behind them. Ines had been at his side the entire time since they'd left the capital, but she was temporarily away. Apparently, she had “carelessly spilled some water” and would return once she had cleaned up. Zenjirou found it hard to imagine her fouling up in her work, but however skilled someone was, they would still make mistakes.

Once they returned to the annex, he parted with Freya and changed in his room. One of the middle-aged maids who worked for the Gaziel household helped him to do so. It felt slightly abnormal for someone other than the inner palace maids to be helping him, but Ines was the only one in the region, so it was unavoidable.

Fortunately, the plump maid seemed rather familiar with what she was doing and soon had him out of his stifling uniform and changed into loungewear.

“Good work; you can leave. Oh, if Nilda comes back, show her through.”

“Very well, I will take my leave,” she answered with a bow before doing exactly that.

He let out a sigh. Unlike with Ines or the other palace maids, he had to maintain his formal speech and conduct, so it made him tense to have them around.

Sitting down on the plain sofa—it had been made with sturdiness as its first priority—Zenjirou rolled his neck with a string of cracks.

“Right, where'd the towel go?” he said, pausing to use the flashlight to illuminate the table in front of the sofa to find it. “Ah, there it is. This darkness really is a pain.”

There was an oil lamp on the table, but the small flame was as much use as a chocolate teapot for Zenjirou's ill-adapted eyes. He used the towel to dry the

sweat from his face and neck as he lounged on the sofa, looking intently at the flashlight in his hand.

“It really saved the day, huh...”

He usually kept the various tools he’d brought from Japan out of the public eye to avoid the inevitable bother, but there had been no real choice this time. If he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have been able to prove that the Nabarans were lying. And he absolutely couldn’t have allowed the trial to end in Capua’s loss.

If the lie had prevailed, the Nabarans would have demanded that the women apologize for casting aspersions on a knight, at which point, there was a strong possibility it would have been discovered that Nilda Gaziel was not officially a noble.

That would have, in turn, resulted in the prevailing view that a woman had cast aspersions on a knight despite not even being a noble, and those aspersions had simply been her seeing things as well.

“Well, I managed to get us out of the worst of it. Yup, good job, me,” he said.

It was a rarity for him to praise himself, but he had not just avoided the worst case, he’d also gotten a guarantee that the matter would end here and not be brought up again.

It was a surefire defense against the matter causing further trouble, so he was well within his rights to say he’d done well.

“Princess Freya’ll be the issue. I shoved a lot of the crap her way in the end. I feel like I’m marching down into the abyss.”

Zenjirou’s deep sigh spread slowly through the dimly lit room.



While Zenjirou was feeling the simultaneous sense of victory and fatigue, the defeated Nabarans were experiencing the bitter taste of defeat and futile effort.

“Your Excellency, I offer my deepest apologies.”

Christiano Pinto’s usual confidence had vanished as he despondently bowed his head to his superior in apology.

It seemed an appropriate response to the incident—particularly him almost ending up as a hostage through General Pujol’s actions.

“Indeed, it was a disaster. I am sure you know that there are people out there who are terrifying in the extreme now. Take it as a valuable lesson.”

“I will.”

While Martin was consoling his subordinate openheartedly, he was internally just as shaken.

That was close. My little sandbox was crushed to smithereens.

Things had gotten so far out of his control that he wanted to smack his past self for his plan to use it as a faux battle for Xavier and Chris. That was, of course, due to Princess Freya’s unforeseen inclusion and Zenjirou’s decisive statement in the closing section of the trial, and most of all Pujol’s insistence on getting something out of it.

Xavier had therefore been relegated to a mostly supporting role, and Chris had suffered an all-out loss.

Well, there is at least benefit in showing the prodigy that there are still people he cannot win against.

In hindsight, the results weren’t all that bad.

“Protecting your subordinate, even from their own mistakes, is not a bad decision. However, sometimes the evaluation can sway both your subordinate and opponents. Keep that in mind.”

“I will, sir. I will remember it well.” His expression looked like his superior had finally pulled him from the waves.

General Martin’s statement was not an empty one. Covering for a subordinate’s mistake would ordinarily be seen as an issue, but it was not a poor option as a superior to gain your subordinate’s trust. Particularly in circumstances like this, proactively defending your subordinate would give them the feeling that you were their ally.

Of course, there was the risk of overdoing it and making them think they could do anything and their superior would cover for them, so there was a line

that mustn't be crossed.

Due to that, the general didn't really see his own subordinate's behavior as inherently wrong. The fact that he hadn't brought the ringleader with him was also a good sign.

The knight leader must have been expecting a real reaming from Martin. Not bringing Raymundo showed that he was willing to take the entire remonstrations on himself.

The soldiers liked men who would protect them from those higher up the food chain as well as from their enemies.

All that said, though, Martin couldn't say that Chris had done *nothing* wrong. His bearlike face shifted instantly into a harsh countenance as he scolded the young knight in a low voice.

"The worst thing you did was move to fight in front of His Majesty. My heart was in my mouth at that point; you need to control yourself more."

"You noticed?!"

Martin frowned at the shock in the young knight leader's voice. "Of course I did. General Pujol likely did as well. If you had actually touched your sword, he would have stepped in. On that front, at least, we were a hair's breadth away. That last shred of self-control saved your life."

That woman seemed to realize it as well, but maybe I'd better not say that. Martin calmly decided that Chris currently lacked the ability to accept that a woman was stronger than him.

The younger man looked back at his general in shock. He honestly hadn't thought that anyone noticed the brief move towards fighting that he'd made in the dim light there. While he still had far to go as a person and commander, and he knew that, he was most confident in his combat ability. Yet now he knew that he couldn't measure up to the great war heroes in the slightest.

"Truthfully...it was a coincidence. There was a small puddle of water when I stepped back. Its chill managed to calm me down."

"I suppose we can consider that good luck, then."

While he looked confused about there being a puddle of water on the flagstones, he must have just assumed it hadn't yet been cleaned up before the trial.

“Regardless, to be utterly blunt, Nabara is by no means a big player in Western Randlion. You will often be in an inferior position with international negotiations. If you cannot learn how and when to behave, you will not be allowed out of the country. Not everyone is as generous as His Majesty. If anything, assume most people are like General Pujol.”

Of course, both Zenjirou and Pujol were extremes on the scale, so there weren't many like either of them, but this was to chide his subordinate.

“I understand, sir! I will not be so foolish again,” Chris promised, straightening.

The general gave a hum and a nod in response.



Meanwhile, the Gaziels were sharing the joy of getting through the event with their inner circle.

“That was a disaster, Nilda, Xavier.”

Son and daughter both smiled in answer.

“It was all due to my inability,” Xavier said. “Fortunately, Sir Zenjirou’s efforts kept Nilda’s honor intact, but I couldn’t protect her myself. Lucinda left her to me and I could not even do that.”

“Don’t be so sad about it. I was happy you tried so hard to protect me.”

“I tried, but that doesn’t mean anything without actually managing it.”

His younger half sister was doing her best to console him. They were close enough siblings that even the margrave found himself smiling.

However, as he considered the future, it wasn’t all smiles. A large part of what made these meetings so pleasant was the eldest daughter, Lucinda. It was her efforts in aiding her father with training her brother to inherit, in ensuring Nilda had the necessary training to be nobility and simultaneously making sure there was sufficient love in the household, that they were a real family. But now, she

was gone.

“Well, whatever else, we can take heart that things ended without issue. Xavier, you should certainly think on and learn from this, but do not let it become a regret. When you mourn your past regrets, you damage your future success.”

“I understand, father.”

The margrave adjusted his position slightly uncomfortably at the open expression on his son’s face. More than half of his earlier statement had been meant for himself.

Truly, I should stay with what I am used to. Falling for General Martin’s honeyed words nearly had us in the midst of a huge issue. Simple old fools like me should focus on solving the problems in front of us, one at a time.

Reflection and rallying himself was the margrave’s specialty. Once he had marshaled himself, he turned his gaze from his son to his daughter.

“Nilda, this was serious. However, a large part of its escalation rests with you. You are already fifteen; you need to learn how to behave as a proper noble lady.”

“You are right. My apologies, father.”

She was only fifteen by the continent’s way of counting ages, and she looked even younger than her actual age as she hunched over, her small ponytail bouncing.

Seeing her curl in on herself, the margrave kept his expression harsh while internally panicking. *Ah, is she crying? Damn it, Lucinda would normally calm her down, so I just told her off like we normally would.*

The aging noble cleared his throat. “That said, with Lucinda leaving, there is no one here to train you in that way.”

Of course, it wasn’t as if there was not a single female noble in the march. The Gaziel family had several vassal families and there were female nobles among them. However, they were still vassals, so the required etiquette was slightly different than a standard noble.

A standard noble family would have a specialist among their vassal families to teach manners, but the Gaziels were a military family and lacked refined people in that respect.

“Then what should I do, father?” she asked uneasily.

He already had an answer ready. “This was my plan to begin with, but when I return to the capital, you will accompany me. There will be several methods of learning in the capital.”

Her expression changed completely at that.

“I’m going to the capital? Really, father?!”

Nilda was a mature girl now, so she obviously had a strong longing to visit the capital.

“You are. You became an adult this year, so you need to be present there and at least visible.”

“Right! Oh, father, Sir Zenjirou said that if I ever visited the capital, he would show me around the palace. May I actually visit?”

The margrave’s eyebrows rose at the surprising statement.

“Hmm? Sir Zenjirou said that? That is rare, but if he said so clearly, it likely was not for politeness’s sake. You may send a letter when we arrive. If it was meant sincerely, he should send a positive response.”

“I will, but, ah, the letter...”

“Will be written by you.”

“Right...” she answered after a pause.

Writing was the thing she most struggled with in her training as a lady, so she had a slightly troubled look on her face.

His brow softened as he watched the repeated cute actions of his daughter and murmured, “Still, her training? Amanda would be the most suitable...but that would be difficult. I should still ask regardless, I suppose.”

Thus, the margrave made plans to contact his younger cousin, who worked in the inner palace as the head maid.



Freya had headed for a different room than Zenjirou and had done much the same as him, changing from her light blue dress into more of a nightdress. Her close aide and guard, Skaji, aided her.

On the voyage, Skaji had been the only other woman. So although it wasn't originally her job, she could do most of what a maid could.

"Thank you, Skaji. Are you not going to change as well?" Freya asked once they were done.

"I am your guard," she answered, lifting her spear slightly.

"Very well, then. Still, I need to thank you again. At the very least, you should sit down."

"I shall accept the offer."

Following the suggestion, the tall warrior sat across from Freya on a sofa. Of course, her beloved tusk-spear was resting at the side of it so she could immediately shift to being battle-ready if the need arose. She was sitting much less deeply than Freya as well.

The oil lamp on the table gave Freya's short silver hair and Skaji's long gold hair a fantastical red tinge to it. Sitting in the dim light, the Northern princess crossed her arms and grinned joyously.

"Did you see the look on his face when His Majesty cornered that knight?! That was the face of someone staring into the abyss! I deserve an award for not cheering then and there!"

The veteran warrior smiled ruefully as her liege grew uncharacteristically energetic. "Princess, please calm yourself. I cannot deny that it was a thrilling turnaround, though."

"Wasn't it just? Even better, it wasn't only the knight. That knight leader who was looking down at me had to correct himself because of His Majesty. I've fallen in love with him all over again."

The warrior's face stiffened at the easy admission from her princess. "If you are falling in love again, does that mean that you had already fallen for him?"

she asked carefully.

Freya answered without an ounce of hesitation. “I had. Well, ‘love’ is perhaps too strong a word, but I was certainly fond of him. After all, the journey here was probably among my top five most fulfilling times.”

“I suppose so.”

Skaji had been with Freya for the majority of the latter’s life, so she knew that Freya was being honest. During her time on the Northern Continent, Freya *had* accompanied soldiers, and been hunting, and so on. However, she was treated as a princess in the end regardless. She was only allowed to hunt rabbits and foxes alone, and even when she brought down a deer or reindeer, she was at best allowed to shoot it with an arrow while surrounded by guards.

And yet, here, she had been allowed to take up a spear and bring down a drake. It was doubtless the memory of a lifetime for her. She had even carefully taken its horn and would give it to a craftsman to be made into some form of decoration when they returned.

“Of course,” Freya said with a smile, “killing the drake is the memory that leaves the deepest impression, but that isn’t all I mean. His Majesty was extremely pleasant to share a carriage with. He paid attention to my needs. but not out of any sense of my being inferior because I was a woman. He treated me like an equal. I cannot quite put it into words, but I felt none of the pressure I usually would when speaking with a man; it was a real breath of fresh air.”

For better or worse, Zenjirou had the values of a man from modern Japan. Of course, he had learned the etiquette here thoroughly, so he changed his manner of speech with superiors, inferiors, men, and women, but his fundamental values held that everyone was equal nonetheless. That lack of condescension had probably been something she had noticed due to their lengthy time in close proximity.

“There are also his actions during this incident. I am so happy to know there is a man like him.”

While Zenjirou felt guilty about putting Freya in the line of fire and dishonoring her, she saw no negatives to it. After all, when Raymundo had maintained that it was their mistake, Freya couldn’t stomach her anger either.

Still, she had borne it to avoid causing trouble to her partner, but he had then said that he didn't care and she could go all out, and he'd have her back. Freya couldn't have been happier.

Zenjirou seemed to feel guilty because it would damage her reputation on the Southern Continent, but that was no real issue for her. He was the only one on the Southern Continent she wished to marry, so as long as it didn't sour things with *him*, she couldn't care less what anyone else thought of her.

Even if the marriage between them didn't pan out, she would simply be recalled to her homeland and have a political marriage there. At that point, she would never need to return to the Southern Continent, so a slight blemish on her reputation wouldn't really affect her. Still, a large part of why she could so readily disregard it was that she was slightly more mentally resilient than most people.

"He believed in me. It wasn't just an empty statement, he believed in my *ability* to remember things calmly and in my night vision. He even demanded that Knight Leader Chris rescind his earlier doubts."

"So he did." Skaji nodded, calmly watching her mistress. She could see what the princess meant; she truly had fallen for him again. More accurately, Freya's faint affection had grown into real love.

Even so, it was still on the level that if her father refused, she would get over it without much issue. In that respect, Freya's logic was strong due to her lineage as a royal. Still, love was love.

Skaji had watched over Freya since she was young, and her emotions were slightly odd as well. *To think a boyish princess like her would fall for someone without even a single callus. When she first suggested the marriage, I thought it was merely calculated, but you can't assume things like that.*

While the warrior pondered the situation, the princess's pale cheeks slightly flushed as she continued.

"By the way, Skaji, I need your opinion on something. According to Zenjirou, he has no training as a warrior. Would you agree with that?"

"I would. There is no doubt. Despite how rude it sounds, he has the same

fighting ability as a woman or child,” answered the warrior.

While it was very much like bad-mouthing her liege’s future husband, Freya smiled even more deeply when she heard that. “I thought so. In which case, I have something to ask you. I have a plan to tie myself to His Majesty on the journey back.”

“Let me hear it,” Skaji answered after a pause, having a bad feeling about what had prefaced that statement, but she could not reject Freya’s request based on a gut feeling.

Not noticing her confidante’s russet eyes narrow, Freya’s smile remained in place as she explained her idea. “We will have several days in the carriage on the way back, right? I’ll use the time to press him. I *am* at least as strong as an average warrior, so I should be able to hold him down. It’ll be fine. Even if he resists at first, if I keep going—”

“Your Highness!” Skaji scolded in a low voice as her liege suggested a role reversal of the bawdy tales she’d heard from the sailors during their trip.

Epilogue — The Return

Several days passed, and Zenjirou was once more being shaken around by the eight-drake carriage. Sharing the space were the same people as on the trip out. His partner for the marriage—Freya—was there along with Skaji as her guard.

Natalio was also there as Zenjirou's guard, and Ines was present as well. Counting Zenjirou, there were five of them riding together.

While the carriage wasn't too wide, as the roads were unsuitable for it, its length was on par with a standard train carriage, more than enough for their group. It had separate bedrooms, so Zenjirou saw it as more of a massive campervan.

While it was exquisite in looks, the carriage had no suspension or rubber on its tires, so was by no means comfortable, but the soft cushion, and particularly his experience on the outward journey, meant that he wasn't struggling too much. It was comfortable enough that he could hold a friendly conversation.

However, it almost would have been better if he had not been as accustomed to it. The reason was obvious.

"The ocean is, of course, where much of my interest lies. If I can gain Her Majesty's permission, then I would like to take the *Glasir's Leaf* further south someday."

The events had forcefully shortened the conversational distance between Freya and him.

"That sounds interesting. Our lands are in the midwest of the continent. There are several countries in the southwest as well, and if you head east, you would be able to reach the southernmost lands."

"Oh my, it would be wonderful to circumnavigate the continent one day."

Zenjirou chuckled. "I would expect nothing less from you. Your curiosity knows no bounds. That would be rather difficult, though. Much of the north of

our continent is barren desert. Even the *Glasir's Leaf* would need to be fully stocked and prepared for such a voyage, as there is almost nowhere to resupply.”

“Ah, the vice-captain said something similar.”

Even as the conversation flowed, Zenjirou was internally cradling his head. It wasn't because he wasn't enjoying their talk. It was quite the opposite: he'd realized that he was well and truly drawn into conversation with her.

He wasn't blunt enough that he wouldn't notice the blatant appeal, nor was he unfeeling enough that the beautiful princess's smiles didn't affect him. Seduction was perhaps too strong a word, but she was about ten centimeters closer than before, so the closer contact threw his mind into disarray.

She's close! Way too close!



In truth, there was practically no one who would take issue with him accepting her, but Zenjirou himself couldn't let go of his monogamous values. He felt guilty every time he felt his eyes strayed to another woman when he already had his beloved wife, Aura.

"Your Majesty, that actually reminds me. The plans say that the repairs should soon be finished on the ship. We were planning to return to Valentia and take it on a shakedown. Would you be willing to join us? The feeling of the salty breeze and the waves beneath you is superb."

Despite his concerns, he couldn't just cut the conversation off.

"That sounds very interesting. I would be more than happy to accompany you on a shakedown, but you'll need to make sure not to head for the Northern Continent. I won't be able to get back," he answered with a laugh.

There was no reply forthcoming.

"Ah, Princess Freya? Can you hear me? Is there some kind of issue? You just fell silent."

"Ah, it's nothing. I just found myself lost in thought."

"I see. Well, I will need to arrange my duties to allow for a trip to Valentia. Even if we ask Her Majesty to send us there, it will take several days to return," he continued, remembering his efforts to learn how to teleport on his own. He had, in fact, succeeded in chanting the spell correctly once.

I can't go to the Twin Kingdoms until I learn it, after all. I need to be able to do so before Aura has her next child.

That brought another thought to mind.

That's right, we need to try for it before she'll actually have one. We finally started again, but I've been away for a month. Once we get back, I'll go all out with her!

Zenjirou's love for his wife was as unshakable as ever.

As his thoughts turned back to Aura, the silver-haired beauty at his side had to admit defeat for the moment. He didn't even notice her sigh.



Meanwhile, in the royal palace, Zenjirou's beloved wife—Queen Aura I—was in a most compromising position, her clothes open in front of a man.

Of course, there was no issue with her morals, and the man in front of her was a bearded fellow with white hair—the royal physician, Doctor Michel.

It went without saying, but he offered no reaction to her full breasts on display in front of him, simply placing a hand on her stomach to see how it felt.

“How is that, Your Majesty? Can you feel anything unusual when I press here?”

“No,” she answered after a pause. “It feels the same as ever.”

“Hmm, I see. My apologies for the bother, Your Majesty; you may reclothe yourself.”

In response, the queen closed the front of her dress, dressing properly again. Familiar movements saw her red dress adjusted in moments, and she questioned the doctor immediately.

“So, what is your judgment? Do I have a second child inside of me?”

As her question indicated, the examination was to check for a second pregnancy. Aura's monthly cycle had been delayed. It should have arrived over ten days prior but had not yet. So was it possible?

With such thoughts in mind, she had asked Michel for an examination, but the aging doctor's face was twisted into a frown as he shook his head.

“It is difficult to say. Truly, I could see no sign of conception.”

There was a clear look of disappointment on her face at his answer. “I see. I have not noticed any changes to my taste or sense of smell as I did last time, so perhaps it is just some irregularity with my monthly cycle.”

As she spoke, the queen went to stand, but he raised a hand to forestall her.

“It is too soon to know, Your Majesty. Though I am reluctant to say so as a doctor, I am inexperienced with the signs of early pregnancy, so I may not have noticed any such symptoms. When a married woman is sexually active and her

cycle is delayed, there is a high chance she is pregnant.”

“There is? But my taste and sense of smell are the same, and that was not the case when I was pregnant with Carlos.”

Despite her hope being rekindled, she was still looking doubtfully at the man.

“Pregnancy often causes a change in your sense of taste or smell, yes,” he explained with a gentle expression. “However, it is not consistent, even with the same patient. Some women desire sour foods during their first pregnancy but want sweet foods during their second, for example. It is by no means rare.”

“Oh? So you mean there is a possibility?” Her eyes, a brown so bright they could be mistaken for red at a glance, shone.

“Indeed. I would therefore request you spend the next half a month operating under the assumption that you are pregnant. You must not drink as you usually do.”

In the face of their physician, even the most influential of royals were weak.

“Hmph...there is no choice. Oh, then should we stop attempting to conceive until we are sure? My husband should return in a few days if all goes well.”

“That is indeed out of the question,” the doctor answered immediately.

In the modern world, with contraceptive devices and careful choice of position, there was no issue with sex while pregnant, but medical science had not advanced so far in this world, unfortunately. The doctor’s decision was extremely reasonable.

“So I will need to make him wait for at least half a month and possibly almost a year once he returns.”

She was not conceited; she simply knew just how much Zenjirou loved her. The best way to deal with Zenjirou’s displeasure regarding taking a concubine was to sleep with him, and he was returning just as she lost that method.

“Now, what to do?” she mused.

The ordinarily welcome news of the possible pregnancy was instead making Aura worry.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life 8*.

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Game

Maintenance

With its master, Zenjirou, away in the Gaziel march, the inner palace was almost chaotic.

One of the maids had already left to get married, while two others had had their marriages decided but were still in the inner palace. Three new maids had also joined to take their places.

The changeover was going to result in a great deal of upheaval when Princess Freya of the Kingdom of Uppasala was added to the mix. She was, practically speaking, an exceedingly likely candidate for his first concubine.

Of course, even with that decision, it would be a while before she entered the inner palace itself, but the maids would obviously need to be ready before that. They would have to clean the currently disused separate lodgings and ensure they were always ready for someone to move in, and the bath cleaning and water gathering would need to be reconsidered if another person would be using it.

Furthermore, Zenjirou had made inquiries about setting up a sauna to suit the culture of her homeland, so Amanda was racking her brain to decide where that should be done and determine the required fuel and water.

While the palace was a flurry of activity, the three problem maids—Faye, Dolores, and Letti—were worrying about something completely different. Any concubines would be a problem for them far in the future, and their concerns were much more immediate. As a result, they'd had several sleepless nights of late. There was a keen worry that had kept them up.

It was, quite simply, the fact that Zenjirou had taken two handheld consoles with him.

"Awww...so bored," Faye moaned pitifully, her small frame slumped face-first on her bed.

Even in the best of lights, she would have looked like a child sulking as she kicked her pajama-clad legs. Fortunately, the room was currently pitch-black.

“Quiet, Faye, I can’t sleep,” came a sharp retort from the taller maid—Dolores—as her slim body lay in a much more dignified fashion on her own bed. Still, it was nothing more than an excuse.

“Dolores, you probably wouldn’t be able to sleep even if she was quiet,” their other roommate—Letti—pointed out from *her* bed.

The darkness of the room made it impossible to tell, but her chest was big enough that it would be clear even as she lay on her back. Her tone was as easygoing as her personality while she scolded Dolores.

“Well, maybe...”

Indeed, their lack of sleep had nothing to do with the noise. It was simply due to the fact that they were usually still awake at this time of night. This would normally be when they passed around the handheld console and enjoyed themselves playing games. It was akin to middle schoolers getting used to being up at all hours to play around.

Now, the games were gone, and there was a restriction on how much lamp oil they could use, so they couldn’t even light the lamp. There was nothing they could do *but* sleep. However, sleep didn’t come so easily.

Thus, the problem maids languished and exchanged incoherent conversation until sleepiness finally arrived.

“I wonder what Sir Zenjirou’s doing right now. He won’t delete our save data, will he?” Faye mused.

“Don’t tempt fate! I hope not. I like games, but I don’t want to start gathering plates all over again!” Dolores cried, bolting upright.

It wasn’t a surprising response. Liking a game didn’t mean that you enjoyed killing hundreds of the same monsters for rare drops and the like. Dolores in particular had bad luck, and it would sometimes take her over a hundred monster kills to obtain a drop (on average, it should take fifty kills to get it).

Games were a fun diversion, but there was a reason gathering rare materials

was called “grinding.” When the 113th monster had finally dropped what she’d been after, Dolores had cursed viciously into her pillow.

“Yeah, I don’t want that either.” Letti laughed and then said frankly, “If it happens, I might just not play again.” While she had much better luck, Letti was awful with the controls.

In actuality, though, their worries were needless. Zenjirou had several memory cards. So while it wasn’t the case with the block drop or cart racing games he had competed against them with, he changed the memory card whenever he stuck the note on the console to say they could borrow it, and he’d put his own cards in before he’d taken them.

There was no way the maids would know that, though. Problem maids though they were, they *were* full maids of the inner palace; they wouldn’t mess around with his things while borrowing them. Therefore, all they could do was use the instructions Zenjirou had translated to switch the games they were playing or turn the device on or off.

“Urgh, it’s bizarre. Now that it’s not here, I want to play it even more,” Faye grumbled.

“I get you completely,” Dolores answered.

While Amanda was perfectly justified in calling them problem maids for staying up all night talking, they were victims in their own way. After all, this habit had started, ultimately, because of Zenjirou. Having brought his LED lamps from Earth, he was very much a nighthawk (by this world’s standards). Aura lived with him, so she had been caught up in the same lifestyle.

Thus, to cater to them, some of the maids were required to work until late at night. Specifically, those assigned to both clean and be on call for their masters’ whims had to wait in the room next to the living room until the couple had retired.

The other roles—cooking, gardening, and bathroom duties—all had normal work hours, which meant the maids had a somewhat irregular work schedule. Of course, the majority were used to that lesser amount of sleep, but the three new maids weren’t used to the later hours and fought to stay awake in the

waiting room.

As for the problem maids, they had well and truly adapted to the longer hours. When they were assigned to clean, they kept up their work until the later hours required of them. When assigned elsewhere, they'd bring the game console back and play until they felt tired. Essentially, they had tailored their hours to the shifts required when cleaning, even when they weren't in those roles.

Making the late nights routine also made them a habit. Of course, the "late nights" as they were seen in this world wouldn't even be close to someone from Earth's view on it. At the very least, they were *never* up as one day changed into the next. They needed to get up early the next morning, so a direct comparison was impossible, but it was a sufficient amount of time for sleep while one was young.

That was why they were now faced with the issue of being unable to sleep.

"I. Caaan't. Sleep."

"Argh, shut up already."

"Hmm...I might be a bit sleepy. Maybe?"

The whispered conversations between the three would continue for a little while longer.



Amanda, as one could imagine from her position as head maid of the inner palace, was a capable employee with both ability and experience aplenty. Even she, though, had never served someone from another world before.

While from Zenjirou's perspective she carried out her work perfectly, from her perspective, he was an extremely difficult master. After all, her knowledge just didn't apply to him.

He disliked the perfumed oils but also disliked the smell of sweat to an equal degree. On top of that, he was considerate to the staff—for whatever reason—and wouldn't actually express such complaints.

While a maid, she was also a highly ranked noble and had a significant

amount of skill in reading people, but she had never considered that such a skill would be required for the master she served rather than a normal social occasion.

However, there was another reason she found him a difficult master that was far more relevant—he was soft on the maids. It made some of their jobs easier, but only for the young maids. Amanda was responsible for the young ones as a whole, and she would have to say that it made things worse.

Her job was to vigorously train and supervise the young maids. However, if their master was soft on them, it would inevitably lead to them growing lax as well. It was even worse because in Zenjirou’s case it wasn’t just him being soft; he actively preferred that less formal atmosphere.

Under a soft master, she had to respect that while also instructing the maids so that their skill levels wouldn’t drop, along with enforcing discipline. She was effectively being asked to accomplish two mutually exclusive goals. It was almost an absurd demand.

She had spent over a year doing so now, so she was well aware of how soft he was. The instructions he had left behind when he had departed this time, though, surpassed that awareness somewhat.

“I knew Sir Zenjirou was soft in general, and particularly towards those problem maids...but this feels like a step too far,” she muttered to herself before sighing. That didn’t mean that she wouldn’t fulfill his instructions, though.

Pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and index finger, she shrugged slightly to herself.



Not all of the maids felt that “the head maid’s office” would be more accurately named “the lecture room,” but Faye, Dolores, and Letti wouldn’t disagree with the sentiment. Thus, when they were summoned to the office, the three lined up with meek expressions in front of Amanda. This was something all of them were used to.

“Head Maid.” Faye bowed respectfully.

“We have come to answer your summons,” Dolores added, following suit.

“Is there something you need of us?” Letti asked.

Seeing the three shrink in on themselves under the assumption they would be getting a scolding made Amanda sigh mentally.

So, they think they’ve done something they would be scolded for. Probably several ‘somethings.’ Honestly, these girls...

Maintaining perfect posture to serve as an example, she addressed the trio before her.

“Faye, Dolores, Letti, I have a special duty for the three of you.”

As one, the girls’ expressions turned sour for an instant.

“Very well.”

“We understand.”

“Please tell us what you need of us.”

Their original expressions were smoothed over in moments and replaced with brisk obedience, but it still aggravated Amanda’s headache.

A maid of the inner palace should never let such displeasure show. I will need to retrain them later.

Despite her thoughts, Amanda kept flawless control over her own emotions, not allowing them to color her face or voice.

“I shall. However, this is not something that is an absolute requirement by any means, and if any of you think it over and decide it is too much to ask of you, then I expect you to admit it. I take it you are aware of the personal effects Sir Zenjirou brought from his homeland?”

“We are.”

The three of them perked up at the question. Most things involving those personal effects were either delicious or fun.

As Amanda watched them lean forward with sparkling eyes, she knew that she would *definitely* need to retrain them.

It does rather vex me that their optimism is correct this time, though. Sir Zenjirou is far too soft.

“With Sir Zenjirou away, his effects are left inoperative. He has told me that such a state is not good for them and that he would like them to be used now and then while he is away.”

They understood the meaning of her words in an instant, all three of them smiling widely, their joy inconcealable.

“We understand!”

“You can rely on us!”

“We’ll do our best.”

The “personal effect” being referred to here was his non-portable console. It was also obvious that it was a favor from him, and the lack of use being bad for them was nothing more than an excuse. Game consoles were an appliance, so periodic use was certainly better for their longevity. A month or so was practically nothing, though. Therefore it was quite clear that it was simply an excuse to let them play on the console.

The wonder on the three maids’ faces as they watched the screen while he played had left a lasting impression on Zenjirou. He’d have liked to have invited them to join him, but the difference in social standing made that impossible. Rumors of him inviting maids away from their work to play with him would lead to the terrifying possibility of them becoming concubines. It was a simplistic and somewhat exaggerated way of looking at it, but it was *possible*, so he had to keep it in mind. That was why he’d come up with a pretext to allow them to use it while he was away.

How soft does he intend to be on these girls? Amanda grumbled in her head. She kept her stern expression in place as she spoke.

“That said, this will be *in addition* to your current workload. You cannot abandon your allotted duties for it, so you will be expected to carry this out at night after the rest of your work. Fortunately, Her Majesty has also granted her permission. You may use the living room after she has retired for the night. Of course, making sufficient noise to disturb Her Majesty’s sleep is out of the

question and you must tidy up after yourselves. You have an hour at most to do so.”

Drawing their attention to the fact that Aura was not as easygoing as Zenjirou made even the problem maids revert to meek expressions, their tension clear. As her words implied, Aura was not an unreasonable mistress. She would not find fault with every little thing, but she was also not as kind as Zenjirou. If a servant inconvenienced their master, they would be punished. Especially since Zenjirou was not there to mediate as he usually would.

“We will take care.”

“We won’t cause Her Majesty any bother.”

“We will play quietly.”

The three of them had straightened before giving their determined answers.

“I expect no less,” Amanda said expressionlessly as she heaved the deepest mental sigh of the day.

Using Her Majesty’s name brought their nerves back, but no one suggested not doing it. Letti was the main issue, she thought before addressing the maid in question.

“Letti, this is work, not ‘playing,’” she warned with narrowed eyes.

“Ah, my apologies,” Letti answered, her ever-relaxed sleepy eyes opening wide as she bowed her head.



That night found three figures in the living room. One was small and childlike, another was slim and tall like a model, while the third had a full figure, her chest easily visible even as a silhouette.

It was Faye, Dolores, and Letti.

Zenjirou would call the room pitch-black, but people of this world had better night vision and would have no issue if they paid attention. The generator’s control system and the display on the fridge were constantly lit to show they were working, and that was enough. Even that faint light was enough to keep track of the furniture. However, it was only enough to avoid stubbing a toe on

the sofas and the like, whereas actually doing anything would need proper lighting.

Faye moved on tiptoes like a thief in the night as she switched on the light.

“Agh, bright!” she exclaimed.

“Idiot, don’t be so loud,” Dolores scolded in a whisper-shout. “Her Majesty will hear us!”

“Ah, sorry,” she apologized quietly.

While Faye was—for better or worse—happy-go-lucky, she was still scared of Aura. Before anything like her influence or physical strength entered the equation, it was the queen’s intimidating air that had a mere glare making Faye lower her head reflexively.

“Uhh, should we use any more light?” Letti asked in a murmur.

“Hmm, we probably don’t need to worry, but this is enough, so let’s not bother,” Faye answered.

“Let’s get started then. Do either of you know how to set it up? I bet you don’t, so I’ll do it this time,” Dolores said, taking the lead. She dropped her tall frame down to the carpet, pulling a white console out from under the TV.

“Uh...this goes here and that goes there, right? Oh, this is for power. Letti, plug this in.”

“Sure thing.”

Dolores was checking each thing at a time, but none of it was trial and error, earning a wide-eyed look from Faye.

“How do you know that, Dolores?” she asked.

Dolores turned from her position on the floor to grin triumphantly at her with a giggle. “I thought this might happen. I paid close attention when Sir Zenjirou set up and put this thing away. Indeed, it was all for the time this would come to pass!”

Dolores puffed her chest out—or posed lewdly, depending on your perspective—as she remained on her hands and knees, but she was either slender enough that there was no real sexuality to the movement or was simply

too focused on the games to come.

Regardless, it was very much like her to learn how the console was set up ahead of time. She was thought of as the least problematic of the problem maids not due to being any more serious than the others, but rather due to being adaptable. This was just another example of it. It had come out of left field. For Faye and Letti, being able to use the console was simply a matter of sudden luck, but Dolores had seen it as a possibility for the future. Putting it differently, you could say she treated Zenjirou more lightly than anyone else.

It was a godsend, though, on this occasion. Due to those preparations, they didn't need to waste their playtime with trial and error to set it up.

"This goes in here...then you should just need to press this switch. Yes! Got it," she murmured.

"Oh!"

"Nicely done, Dolores," Letti cheered.

None of them could contain their excitement at the sight of the start screen on the TV.

"Controllers. Are these the controllers?"

"Hey, Faye, I should go first. I did all the planning, so hand it over."

"Come on, Faye, we'll take turns. Dolores gets to go first," Letti said, backing Dolores up.

The three girls, flushed with excitement even as they kept their voices down, carefully started using the controller. It was almost like kids getting up past their bedtime to play once their parents were asleep. Zenjirou had done just that, so the sight might have taken him back to his childhood and made him want to jump in as well. He had fond memories of leveling up in an RPG during elementary school, using the living room TV and hiding from his parents. The scene here was a charming one that would remind him of the good times of his childhood.

Yet, Zenjirou wasn't here, only the maids were. Their eyes were sparkling as they used the controller, playing a full console game for the first time. They

could only read numerals; Japanese—and the occasional English—was completely beyond them. That meant they had no choice but to figure things out through trial and error, but video games were made so that if you just tried things, you'd eventually understand how to control them properly.

The console they were using this time had “motion controllers,” so that was especially true, as they could swing the controller and play the game that way.

The three took to it particularly well, and it didn't take long until they were playing without issue. Thirty minutes later, the girls had become completely familiar with the motion controller and were enjoying the game.

“Faye, there!”

“Yeah, go!”

Faye and Dolores were both swinging controllers in front of the TV, while Letti was watching them with a smile.



The disc currently in the console was a collection of sports games all bundled together. The particular game they were playing was doubles tennis.

Faye and Dolores had teamed up to face the computer-controlled set. Four characters were running all over the tennis court on the screen, hitting the yellow ball back and forth.

They had a pretty good match going now, but that was far from the case when they'd started. If the gameplay had been posted online, the way they played and what they tried to do due to their ignorance would probably have racked up a fair number of views.

It was an inevitable result if you put in any thought. None of them had any idea how to play, or even the rules of "tennis" at all. They didn't know that a serve needed to be returned before it bounced, while any other shot didn't matter, so they tried to return everything after a bounce.

It took a long string of losses before Faye and Dolores arrived at anything that could even charitably be described as "tennis."

Even without understanding the rules or the words on the screen, the slump of their own characters and cheers from the opponents along with the gloomy music from the TV's almost silent speakers let them know they had lost. The two of them were competitive by nature, so they'd kept playing until they won.

"Take that!"

"Nice one, Faye!"

Thus, by the time they reached their first string of five consecutive wins, the pair both had a sheen of sweat on their foreheads.

"You're both great!" Letti cheered quietly, miming a clap. That seemed to make Dolores finally remember she was there, and the taller girl turned around with a guilty look.

"Ah, sorry, you probably want to play too."

Whatever else could be said, the three problem maids got on well. The two of them instinctively moved to include Letti after she'd taken a step back for them.

"Here, Letti. Do you want to keep playing this one where you hit the ball over

the net?" Faye asked as she handed the controller over once Letti had slowly gotten up from the sofa and walked over.

"Thanks, Faye. I want to play the game Sir Zenjirou usually does. You know, the one where you have the thin stick and hit the ball when someone throws it."

"Got it. I think you do this, then this. All right, there you go, Letti."

"Yay, thank you, Dolores," Letti said as she started to play baseball.

The version of baseball the game had was extremely simplified. The player could only control the batter or pitcher. It ended up as a 1-v-1 between the pitcher and batter.

She started off against the computer, but (having failed miserably at winning) the three of them were taking turns. They'd played co-op with tennis and were now playing against each other. One advantage of a console was that it let multiple people play together.

Of course, the same was possible with handhelds if you had more than one, but Zenjirou wasn't enough of a gamer that he had more than one of the same system. If anything, he was casual enough that it was a surprise he had more than one controller. If he hadn't bought it back in his university days when he hung out and played with his friend, he might not have had more than one. In that respect, it was perhaps simply a matter of good fortune they could play together like this.

"Here I go, and...now!"

"Take that. I hit it. Faye, I hit it!"

Faye had a controller in her hand and mimicked throwing the ball, while Letti had the same style of controller but was mimicking swinging a bat. She had fairly bad reflexes, so she was doing the worst of the three, but she still had a constant smile as she played.

In terms of enjoying the game, she might well have been the biggest winner there. Things were different when they were wagering snacks on it, but otherwise, the fun was in the game, not the winning.

The three of them were engrossed in the game when the soft noise of the door opening broke their daze. They reflexively stiffened, thinking the head maid was there to scold them. They'd tried to keep the noise down as much as possible, but they couldn't deny they'd lost themselves in the game. Maybe they'd been too noisy? Would they suffer another lecture from the terrifying head maid?

The three of them watched the door tensely, those thoughts swirling in their heads. Fortunately, someone completely different entered the room.

"Oh? Well, that isn't what I expected to see," the newcomer said.

The three calmed down as they saw her long blonde hair and deep green eyes. Both of those features, along with her pale skin, were fairly rare on the Southern Continent.

"Oh, it's you, Margarette."

"Don't scare us like that."

"Phew, that was such a shock."

While Margarette was a maid in the inner palace, she was Aura's subordinate rather than Zenjirou's. That gave her a unique position in the staff, but she was not their superior; they were on the same level.

Her position meant that they didn't usually interact, but her gentle demeanor and surface friendliness towards everyone meant that the three didn't consider it too deeply and just saw her as a friend.

Her green eyes had widened for an instant upon seeing them playing, but her soft smile soon returned as she almost glided into the room.

"Should you be doing this? I imagine you would earn more than a lecture if Her Majesty or the head maid saw you."

Faye threw up her hands in protest at the look and warning, sending her short black hair fluttering through the air. "No, we have permission!"

"Faye, you're too loud. She's right, though, Margarette," Dolores said. "Sir Zenjirou gave us this job; he wants us to periodically use his things while he's away. Apparently, if you don't, they get damaged."

“I see...” Margarette answered in understanding after a moment of thought.

The logic was sound, but Margarette had seen them enviously watching Zenjirou play, and she could understand his goal as well as the pretext that had been given. Still, he was the palace’s lord, so if he had given permission, there was no need to rebuke them further.

“I suppose that is fine, then. Please keep the noise in mind, though. Her Majesty is sleeping in the bedroom.”

“Ack, could you hear us outside?” Dolores asked, her tanned face paling.

“No, I could not,” the other woman answered with a reassuring smile. “If you can keep the volume to that level, it will be fine.”

In truth, that was a lie. Margarette’s sharp ears had let her hear the noise as she put her hand on the door. That was due to her training in espionage as a youth, though, so she was the only one who would have been able to hear.

“Huh? Then why did you come here?” Letti asked in her usual relaxed tone.

“For the same reason as you,” Margarette answered with a smile. “I was asked to do something especially for Sir Zenjirou.”

“Huh?”

“Sir Zenjirou?”

“Asked you to do something?”

With a sidelong glance to the others as they stopped playing, the blonde took a silver jug from the fridge and poured its contents into a cup.

There was a white liquid inside the jug—goat’s milk.

“Mm...phew...”

The other three left the controllers on the sofa as they walked over to her after she drained the cup unflinchingly.

“What, didn’t Sir Zenjirou say not to drink that?” Faye asked.

“That’s right; will you get in trouble?” Dolores added.

“If we can, then I want to try some as well.”

The blonde gave a shrug as the three surrounded her. “I’m used to it.”

As she spoke, Margarette’s eyes dropped to the dirty cup, looking past it. Zenjirou had forbidden it because the goat’s milk still tasted grassy and animal-like and was hard to drink. The Southern Continent had no mammals that it farmed, so very few people had consumed dairy before. The first taste of something new had a large influence on the future. If the first taste you had was this strong, you might very well avoid dairy later on.

Therefore, Zenjirou had forbidden the maids to drink it until the taste was better. Margarette was an exception. It was not a new drink for her. It was, in fact, a taste of her childhood.

“No fair. You’re so lucky, Margarette.”

Letti was the most jealous. She was usually the personification of a mild smile, but cooking was her hobby and she was earnestly aiming to become the next head chef, so she had a weakness for new tastes and ingredients. Her full chest had almost trapped Margarette, prompting a rueful smile as the other attempted to soothe her saddened colleague.

“I think Sir Zenjirou’s fears are well-founded. It still tastes very ‘animal-like’ and honestly isn’t what I’d call tasty.”

“But I want to try iiiit.”

“You need to be patient. Sir Nicolai is doing his best to improve it, so it won’t be that far in the future.”

Nicolai, Freya’s subordinate loaned to the royal family to teach them how to care for goats, had skills and knowledge that outstripped his age. Due to his instruction in changing the goats’ environment and feed, the poor taste was rapidly fading away.

Nicolai was also well versed in creating cheese, yogurt, butter, and cream, and it wouldn’t be too long before Letti could get her hands on dairy products.

“All right, I’ll wait.”

“That’s good. It sounds as if Sir Zenjirou knows of several desserts using dairy products, so if you have the milk while it still tastes bad, you might become

sensitive to the milk itself and be unable to enjoy those desserts.”

“Oh, new desserts? From Sir Zenjirou?”

“That sounds good. Letti, we’re counting on you.”

The maids had gotten caught up in the conversation and were soon chatting as normal, their game abandoned.

Then, their promised hour came to an end, bringing with it the heartless noise of the door opening. The three fell silent, looking at the door to find exactly who they both expected and didn’t want to see.

Amanda, despite the maids being amongst the detritus of their games in the living room, was expressionless as she spoke.

“Faye, Dolores, Letti, and you too, Dolores. All of you are to tidy up and then come to my room.”

“Urk,” Faye managed.

“Very well, ma’am,” Dolores answered, more composed.

“Okay, I understand,” Letti answered softly.

“My apologies for the bother,” answered their plus-one after a moment.

Each of them had expressions of realization on their faces as they set about tidying up.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

7

Illustrator:
**Jyuu
Ayakura**

Author:
**Tsunehiko
Watanabe**

“I am the
second
daughter of
the Gaziel
family, Nilda.”

The girl, Nilda,
then bowed,
making her
short ponytail
bounce.





**"It's here,
Princess!"**

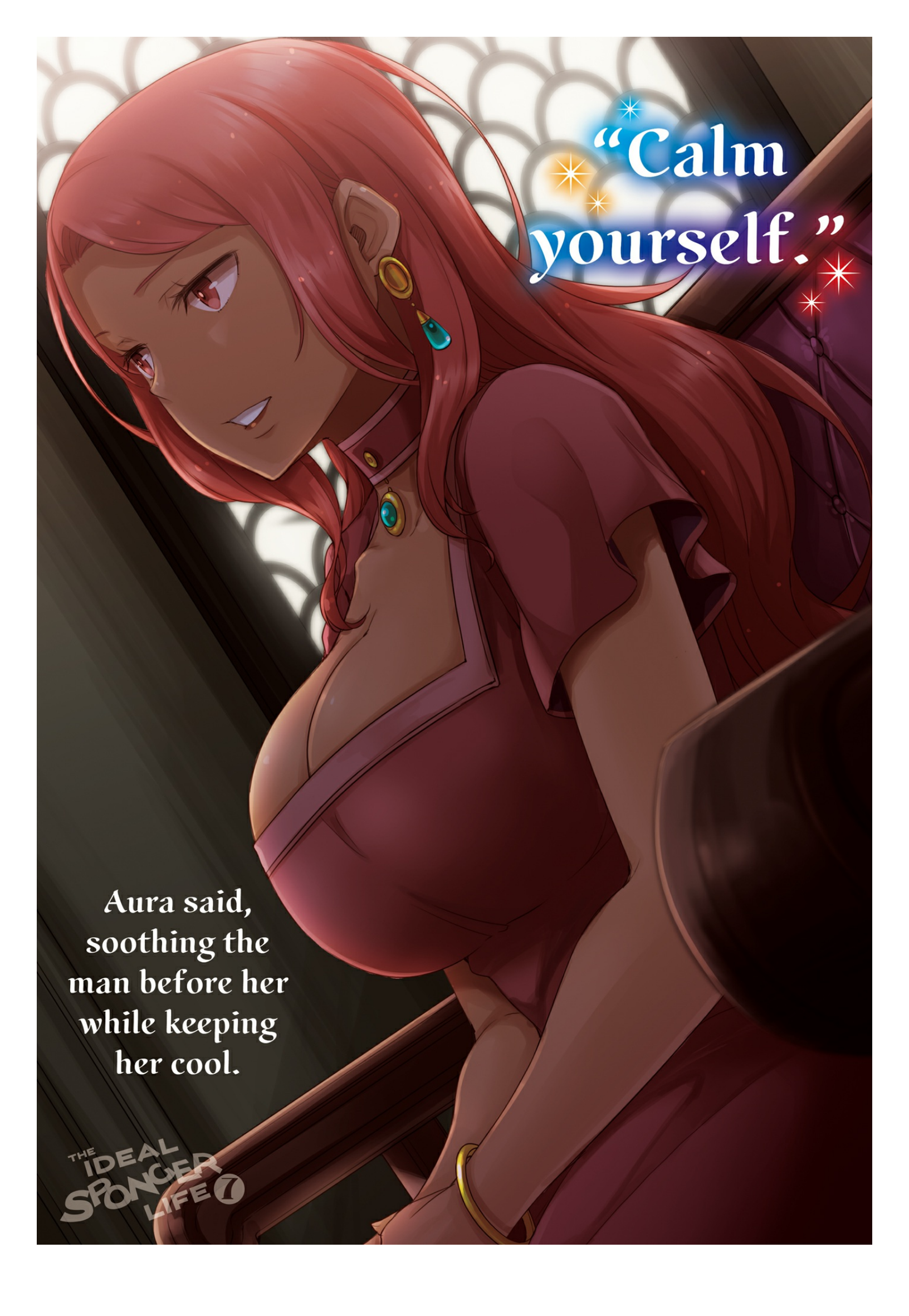
Freya stepped quickly out of the drake's path as it charged down the road, throwing her entire weight behind her spear as she stabbed at it.

THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE

She had
thick, glossy
black hair
and soft,
dark eyes.

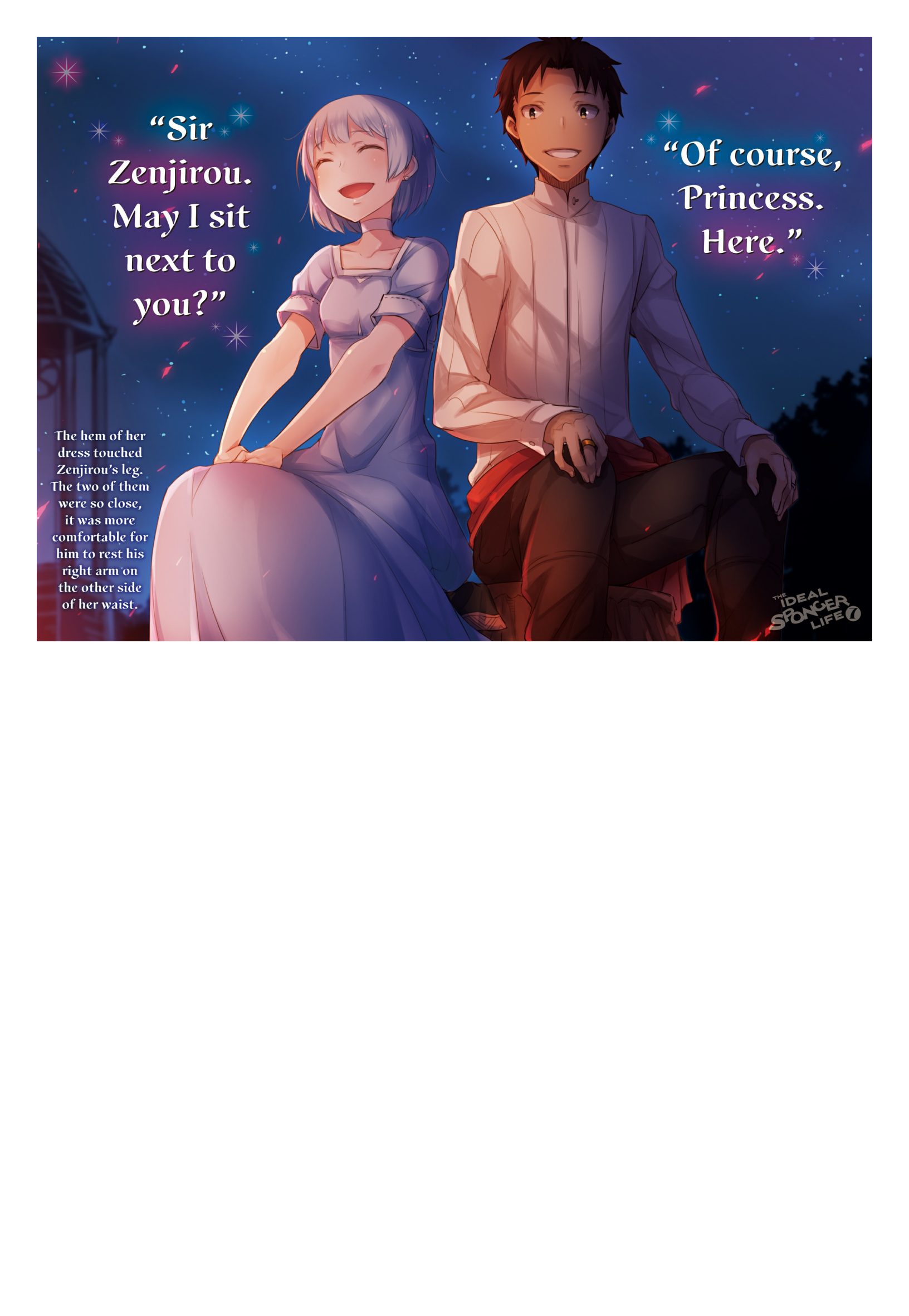
She had
such beauty
that a mere
glance
made it
clear.

So, this is
Lucinda.



“Calm
yourself.”

Aura said,
soothing the
man before her
while keeping
her cool.



“Sir
Zenjirou.
May I sit
next to
you?”

“Of course,
Princess.
Here.”

The hem of her
dress touched
Zenjirou's leg.
The two of them
were so close,
it was more
comfortable for
him to rest his
right arm on
the other side
of her waist.

THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE ①



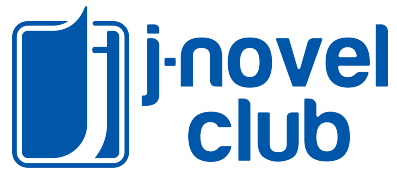












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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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